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АЛЕКСАНДР ВОЛОШИН

ЗЕМЛЯ КУЗНЕЦКАЯ

Р О М А Н



Издательство литературы и иностранных языков

ALEXANDER VOLOSHIN.

KUZNETSK LAND

N O V E L



F
7-929

Foreign Languages Publishing House

**TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY ROSE PROKOFIEVA**

**DESIGNED
BY D MINKOV**

ALEXANDER VOLOSHIN

ALLEXANDER Nikitich Voloshin was born in 1912 in Petersburg.

His father was a worker in the Putilov plant. At the beginning of the First World War the Voloshins moved to Sineria. It was there that the future writer spent his childhood. There he went to school, and wrote for the school wallnewspaper. In 1918 he sent an article about a skiing trip he made with his schoolmates to Kirghiz villages to the local magazine "Tovarishch" ("Comrade") His surprise and joy when it was accepted knew no bounds.

In 1919 Alexander Voloshin received his graduation certificate. Many roads lay open before him, but like most young people of the period, whose innagination was fired by the dazzling targets of the first five-year plan, he chose to take part in the construction of the giant Kuznetsk iron and steel works, the plan's first objective. Working as a concrete layer, he devoted his off hours to Komsomol duties and educational activity among the workers

When the work was finished, young Voloshin, brimming with recent impressions and athirst for a fuller view of life, visited the city where he was born and which now bears the name of the great Lenin. From Leningrad he intended to return to Siberia—a lap of some three thousand kilometres—on foot. This adventurous project was prompted by the youth's ardent longing to see as much of the world as he could with his own eyes, to enlarge his knowledge of life.

Although en route to the Kuznetsk coal basin he did not dispense entirely with the railways and other means of transport, Alexander Voloshin nevertheless satisfied his wish to "see the world." He now had first-hand knowledge of the life of many ancient Russian towns. On his way he had tried his hand at many trades: he had been a sailor and a stevedore, though never so much an apprentice learning a job as a student of human nature. He had been

in Igarka, the largest town of the Extreme North, then little more than a village. His journey ended in Novo-Kuznetsk, now named Stalinsk.

In that town, Alexander Voloshin went down into the pits as a coal hewer and blaster. Later he became a Komsomol organizer at the Osininki Ore Mine. It was then that he wrote his first story, a story about miners which was run by a Stalinsk Komsomol newspaper.

Subsequently called up for service, Alexander Voloshin, following the example of many Soviet army men studying by correspondence at technical schools and higher schools, took a course at the Leningrad Institute of Journalism.

From his discharge and until the Great Patriotic War, the young author worked on the staff of a town miners' newspaper and wrote short stories. In the magazine "Sibirskiye Ogn'i" ("Siberian Lights") carried a short story by him called "Two Friends."

The Great Patriotic War put an abrupt end to this work. First as a private in the engineers and then as Sergeant of the Guards, Alexander Voloshin trod the roads of war. He was wounded three times and decorated with the Order of the Patriotic War and three medals. After the war Alexander Voloshin returned a seasoned veteran to the Kuznetsk basin, yearning, like all ex-fighting men, to tackle a peacetime job and took up the offer of a position on the staff of the *Kuzbas*, the Territorial newspaper.

As a correspondent covering the Stalinsk and Osininki areas, Alexander Voloshin made a thorough study of the life of the miners, both above and below ground, noting everything the Stakhanovite miners had added to the old work methods during the war. He observed the common striving of both the ex-servicemen and those who had laboured in the rear to add new glory to the Motherland. He did much to uphold and promote rationalization proposals in his paper. Alexander Voloshin lived in the very thick of a life stimulated by labour enthusiasm. He published more stories about the miners, two of which, "New Year's Eve" and "The White Swallow," were parts of a future novel.

Alexander Voloshin displayed considerable interest in the past history of the Territory which even he himself could recall as a dead and desolate country. He learned of the brothers Migashev, who belonged to the tiny Shor people and who went to the tsarist officials

with a bag of coal in the hope of bringing to their notice the untold wealth of the land, wealth which would mean much to the country and its people. The brothers were unceremoniously turned away. Undaunted, they sent letter after letter to Petersburg. In 1915 the capital replied by sending an engineer to investigate. The latter made a cursory survey of the Polkashtin ravine and there the matter ended.

This criminal indifference of the tsarist officials towards their country's vital interests shocked Alexander Voloshin all the more in the light of the amazing changes wrought by the people during the Soviet years. He resolved to write a book which would tell the world of the life that had blossomed on what for ages was useless wasteland, and of the hardy Soviet miners who now people it.

"Kuznetsk Land" was first published in 1948 in the "Siberian Lights" magazine; the second edition was put out in Moscow, in 1949.

The novel is preceded by a prologue which outlines the novel's chief idea—the ardent patriotism of the Soviet people, the force which motivates the behaviour of its heroes, fighting to increase coal output, to promote the advanced work methods of the Stakhanovites.

J. V. Stalin, speaking of the Stakhanovite movement, laid stress on one of its fundamental traits. "This movement," said J. V. Stalin, "is breaking down the old views on technique, it is shattering the old technical standards, the old designed capacities, and the old production plans, and demands the creation of new and higher technical standards, designed capacities, and production plans. It is destined to produce a revolution in our industry. That is why the Stakhanov movement is at bottom a profoundly revolutionary movement."*

It is a revolutionary movement of the kind described by J. V. Stalin that Alexander Voloshin writes about in his book, vividly revealing the postwar life of the Kuznetsk miner.

Rogov, the engineer—the book's main hero—heads the Stakhanovite movement at Kapitalnaya Mine. He is an industrial executive of a new type who has no patience with those who would sit back and ride comfortably into communism, who do not actively strive to shorten the period of transition from socialism to communism.

Engineer Drobot, on the other hand, likes doing things the old way. He is a hidebound lover of routine and despite the feeling he has for his mine, his rich experience and weighty special knowledge, he is extremely narrow-minded. The survivals of capitalism have impressed themselves strongly on his make-up, and even while taking part in the socialist emulation drive he takes care not to let his own mine get ahead of the others any more than is necessary for official recognition.

The novel deals with the day-to-day fight with the predilection for the old, conservative ways, the fight to hasten the laggards, which is now being waged by the advanced Soviet people and which becomes more intense as the lights of communism draw closer.

"Kuznetsk Land" is the first major work of the writer. Alexander Voloshin is a skilful portrait painter; he sketches his characters with a few deft strokes that cling to the memory: "He's just a zero ... You'd think by the noise he makes that he's really got something in him. But scratch the surface and all you find is a gasbag."

The reader sees how under the impact of the new, a "spark" is ignited in the heart of chief engineer Filenkov, he will follow with interest the adventures of Annushka, who is "as alive as a drop of quicksilver," and her young husband, Kolya Dubintsev, and all the other memorable characters in the book: miners and engineers, representatives of the older and younger generations. They are all united by their love for constructive labour, their love of country. In this connection, it may be appropriate to quote what the miners in the book said to Kolya Dubintsev's mother who was about to go with a delegation to England.

"Tell the mothers of England about the Kuznetsk land that lies in the heart of great Siberia, tell them that for the miners and steelworkers who live in the Kuzbas there is no greater happiness, no more enviable lot than the lot of the Soviet working folk! And tell them too that there is no force in the world that could take from the Soviet people that which by right they call their own!"

This "lot of the Soviet working folk" has been ably, sincerely and convincingly depicted by Alexander Voloshin in his novel.

The novel "Kuznetsk Land" has won its author a Stalin Prize.

KUZNETSK LAND



PROLOGUE

THE HEARTS of the men beat fast when the train crossed the frontier and sped on deeper and deeper into their native land. Crowding in the open doors of the boxcars, the returning soldiers gazed in silence at the lacerated fields slipping by. A blue haze curled beyond a distant woods and scattered blue-grey cloudlets crept westward across the sky, their edges crimsoning in the setting sun. And it dawned on the men that it had been a long time since their lives had contained such ordinary things as clouds, pink sunsets and curly mists rising over the woods.

This was the homeland. But how many of her sons would never return to their native expanses. .

"Look, a rabbit!" Sergeant Danilov seized his trench cap and pointed excitedly with it at the ball of fluff bounding over the green field.

Sleep eluded them long that evening. At first they talked to the accompaniment of the hurried clicking of

wheels, then several voices joined in the melody of "The weeds rustled and the trees bowed their heads." They sang of Yermak and of great Baikal Lake—sang in impatient anticipation of a home-coming now so near.

The door of the car was left open and far into the night the short, sturdy figure of Stepan Danilov could be seen silhouetted against the pale patch in the darkness. The young man with a stubborn tuft of fair hair escaping from under his trench cap was restless and fidgety, not because of any childish impatience, but because he could not wait to feast his eyes on his native soil and to breathe its fragrance. Short and stocky, he held his head high, and a pair of keen blue eyes shone on his lean, alert face. Whenever the train stopped, regardless of the hour, he would drop down on the trackside and promptly run off somewhere. Thanks to him the occupants of the car were well informed: they knew, for instance, the name of the engine driver, that he had been driving locomotives for thirty-seven years now, that he had a niece who was a student at a Moscow theatrical school, and that all his other relatives had been killed by the fascists.

It was Danilov who announced that the first big station after the frontier would be reached in the morning.

That morning, however, he disappeared. At first nobody thought much about his absence, assuming that he must have been riding in another car or on the buffers. But when evening came and there was still no Danilov, everybody felt somewhat worried. For one thing there was no one to play the accordion or to forage for odd bits of information.

"That's a pretty fix—he must have got left behind," an old soldier named Alexeyev shook his head sadly.

"He's probably found himself a nice girl," Grigori Voshchin joked. "Remember he said when we left Germany that he'd fall in love with the first Russian girl he met on this side of the border."

Two days later, when the train pulled in at Smolensk, Danilov showed up as suddenly as he had disappeared. He climbed into the car without a word to anyone and clambering on to a top bunk fell asleep at once. Upon waking up he made a leisurely meal of a mess tin of baked milk bought from a collective farmer at a wayside stop, wiped his lips, and reached for his accordion. He fingered the keyboard for a while, then stopped, and his hand absent-mindedly strayed to his unruly forelock.

"I took a look at Ovrazhki," he said in a low voice. "That's where I got hit in 'forty-one. Properly too—spent six months on my back in the hospital."

"Well, what was it like?" Alexeyev asked.

"What was it like? Had bedsores all over me—that's what. You could still mine iron out of me."

"Chuck it. That's not what I meant. What was Ovrazhki like?"

"I found the trench our section held," Danilov said, and he smiled sheepishly, as if afraid his excursion might be taken for a boyish prank.

An expectant hush fell over the men around him.

"They've planted potatoes where Section One dug in, and where my trench was they're laying out an orchard. Wonderful folk!" After a moment's pause he added: "A tough spot it was too."

A suspicion of a smile appeared on the faces of the returning soldiers.

"An orchard, eh?" put in Alexeyev.

But Danilov had shaken off the pensive mood and now struck up a lively tune.

In Moscow the men scattered in different directions. Danilov, who was from Novosibirsk, found himself on board a regular passenger train with three other Siberians also headed for home: the sapper Moiseyev, the elderly infantryman Cherkasov, and the rugged, broad-featured signalman Voshchin. They were all going to the Kuznetsk coal fields.

The agile little sergeant quickly took possession of an upper berth. His restiveness was gone and he lay there day and night although the carriage was insufferably hot.

Beyond the Urals the train plunged into the boundless expanses of Siberia. Now a turntable of green steppe dotted with blue splinters of lakes slowly revolved outside the train windows. As the miles clicked off the soldiers grew less talkative. Voshchin and Cherkasov, a reserved pair, showed their excitement by going through their kitbags at more and more frequent intervals to rearrange the modest gifts they were taking to the folks at home. Moiseyev from Prokopyevsk would look around every now and then as though in a daze.

"Hard to believe it's over, isn't it?" he would exclaim, rubbing his hands. "By God, there's no end to miracles!"

"Stow it, man!" Danilov could not refrain from putting in at one of these outbursts of wonderment. "There hasn't been a miracle since Christ's resurrection."

"It's a fact," the other insisted. "Here am I—been fighting for years. . . ."

Danilov groaned.

Moiseyev tugged at his tobacco-stained moustache, then waved away his annoyance and suggested with a wink:

"How about a drink?"

Spreading out on a newspaper a herring, some hard-boiled eggs and slices of roast beef from their travelling ration, they had a drink.

When they passed Omsk, Danilov, warmed by the liquor, told the story of how he first met Voshchin.

"Now you keep quiet!" he turned on the ex-signalman when the latter tried to stop him. "I'm going to give an honest account of what happened. You needn't worry, you've nothing to be ashamed of. . . . Now this was the Twenty-Ninth of April. We were fighting in the very centre of Berlin. Captain Rogov had been wounded on the Oder, and then our lieutenant stopped one at Tempelhof. That put me in command of the platoon which now consisted of four men, counting myself.

"In the morning we got orders to push ahead. The Germans let loose with a heavy-calibre machine gun down the street. We made for the corner of Kirchenplatz in short dashes. Looking around I saw two of our men lying dead in the midst of a lot of plaster and brick and a third standing there without the slightest intention of taking cover. The bullets were whistling and chipping the stone all around, but this here chappie just stood there with tears running down his face, cursing the fascists. 'The bastards,' he says, 'got my pals. . . . We went through the whole war together. . . . They've dug themselves in under that tank over there' "

"Never mind the rest," Voshchin interrupted the speaker in embarrassment. "You know very well it could have happened to anybody."

"I know, I know, only don't interrupt," Danilov went on. "So I told the soldier to take it easy and we'd see what we could do about it.

"He pulled himself together. In the east the sky was as clear as if it had just had a washing, but in the west huge black clouds were piling up one on top of the other. Overhead the sky filled with a roar as our heavy bombers came over—they used to come in waves and go into the bombing run just before reaching our forward lines. You'd pull your head in thinking this was the end, but the bombs would all be neatly planted at the right address.

"Berlin was rocking with explosions and the air was full of smoke. 'That's for Stalingrad, and for Ovrazhki too, damn your hides!' I thought to myself. 'See that knocked-out tank on the corner over there?' I said to the fellows, 'we've got to get the fascists firing from it even if we bust.' I gave the order, 'Right flank, single file forward!' That was more to keep up spirits than anything else, because all I had on my right was Kolka Grachev—a little chap but with plenty of guts.

"The command was hardly out of my mouth when a shower of plaster came raining down on us. So we waited for a while. When it got a little quieter, Kolka made a dash for the sidewalk and took cover behind one of those hoardings. The fascists opened up at him, and Kolka had a hot time of it. I thought they'd get him for sure. Just then the chappie who'd been crying pulled at my leg and said: 'Let me try it, sergeant, I'll do it....' 'You go to hell, cry-baby,' says I, 'and don't mix into a man's show.'

"Before I knew it he was on his feet and in through a window. In the meantime Grachev had managed to reach a crater in the middle of the street and was pinned

down in it by the fire. The remaining three of us were in no better position. We had been hugging the ground for a good quarter of an hour when that chap showed up on a bit of a wrecked balcony sticking out right over the heads of the Germans. And the next thing I knew he was throwing grenades.

"There were two explosions one after the other right behind the tank. When we ran over everything had been nicely cleaned up. The chap was there too—he could hardly stand on his feet. 'I finished the war for them,' he gasps and falls down.

'And that's the whole story," Danilov smiled, "or practically the whole story, because when I was taking him to the dressing station we had another interesting talk. I'll tell you about that some other time."

"Good," Voshchin heaved a sigh of relief.

For a few seconds the two men looked each other in the eye, then winked simultaneously and burst out into good-natured laughter.

Somewhere beyond Barabinsk the little sergeant rose in the middle of the night and after walking up and down among the kitbags and suitcases for a while sat down next to Voshchin.

"Look here, pal," he began in a low voice, "I can't make up my mind. If I get off at Novosibirsk what'll I do there? I haven't got any friends or relatives there. In short, nowhere to go. Haven't even got a trade to speak of—I'd hate to go back to barbering."

"Bit of a fix, all right," mumbled Voshchin in a sleepy voice, although he was wide awake.

"See the point?" the sergeant livened up. "How about the Kuzbas? Suppose I go there, eh?"

"To the Kuzbas?" Voshchin rose on his elbow.

• "Why not?"

"I don't see why you shouldn't. Except that you're not a miner or a steelworker."

Danilov waved the objection aside.

"What of it? Nobody's born a miner."

The conversation worried Voshchin. For a quarter of an hour he tossed over and over in his berth, and finding sleep impossible got up and went out into the corridor.

Outside the car windows the boundless starry night fell steadily behind. Every now and then dark groups of trees raced toward the trackside only to retreat as rapidly into the distance. And through the pounding of the wheels the strumming of a multitude of grasshoppers was clearly audible—the whole world seemed to be full of the tiny creatures going about their business with a diligence bordering on frenzy under each blade of grass and every leaf.

Filling his lungs with the fragrant air, Voshchin drew back from the window. Perhaps he was wrong in deceiving Danilov. Perhaps he should have told him the whole truth?

Voshchin recalled the conversation he had had with Danilov on the way to the dressing station during that first meeting in Berlin.

"So you're a Siberian too!" Danilov had said with elation. "Good old Siberia! Good old faraway Siberia!"

Moreover, it turned out that they were practically neighbours. One came from Novosibirsk and the other from the Kuznetsk coal fields.

"So you're from the Berezovsky Mine?" the sergeant was all agog. "Luck like this comes to a fellow only once

in a lifetime. Take it easy now. Let's sit down here. . . There you are! Now tell me: do you know a girl by the name of Tonya Lipilina. And don't try to tell me there's nobody by that name over there. Know her? I met her on the Bryansk front. She'd been wounded twice and was back in action, then we lost track of each other. The trouble is I haven't got her home address. See?"

"Maybe we'd better see to the bandaging first?" Voshchin tried to get out of it.

"There's no hurry," Danilov objected. "In any case we'll be back in the fight in an hour. Now out with it!"

There was nothing Voshchin could do but tell him that he knew Tonya. As a matter of fact, she was his cousin. He also knew that she had been in the war, and now. . . .

"What's her address?" Danilov interrupted him.

"That's just the trouble—I don't know her address. She's probably moved. . . ." Voshchin felt uncomfortable under the sergeant's steady gaze.

Nothing came of their talk.

"Cousin, you say?" Danilov said with a wry smile, on the way back from the dressing station. "Then what are you squirming for as if you were sitting on hot coals? Mind you, when I get demobbed I'm going down to that mine."

Voshchin had been in an awkward position, and later on it was no easier. What could he do? Tell the truth? Tell him that Tonya was back at home, or, to be more exact, in a hospital in the neighbouring town, and that she was blind, as Aunt Maria had written?

No, that he could not do. He was filled with pity for both his cousin and his soldier-comrade, and he knew that he could not bear to see the spark of hope in Danilov's

eyes extinguished. He would let things take their natural course.

"Maybe everything will turn out all right," Voshchin said aloud and throwing his cigarette butt out of the window looked around.

Two paces away from him was Danilov. Voshchin would have passed him, but Danilov spread out his feet wider in the narrow corridor.

"So you've made up your mind to go to the Kuznetsk coal fields, Stepan?"

The ex-sergeant nodded emphatically.

"Yes. I'm fed up beating about the bush, so let's thrash this thing out now. I want to see Tonya. Let her say the final word—and she will, you can be sure of that. But that's not the only reason why I want to go to the same mine as you. There's a man there I think more of than anybody else in the world—Guards Captain Rogov." Danilov paused for a moment, then went on in a low tone: "He's more than a brother to me. I haven't seen him since he was wounded on the Oder, and I've got to see him. I won't bother you—won't even ask you to put me up."

Voshchin looked hurt.

"That's all right, old man," Danilov gave him a conciliatory nudge. "I knew a soldier wouldn't let a pal down. I was just sizing up the situation."

The conversation was hardly satisfactory, yet it seemed to have injected new life into Danilov. At stations he dashed out for hot water for tea and in between he tirelessly played Russian melodies that clutched at the heartstrings and won him a great many appreciative listeners in the car.

In Novosibirsk a young mother with a lively six-year-old boy came into the next compartment. The youngster

wandered all over the long car, listening intently to the talk of the grownups and himself readily engaging in conversation. But most of all he was drawn to Danilov and his accordion. The shining mother-of-pearl instrument fascinated him. Finally he plucked up enough courage to make a passing jab at the glistening keyboard with one finger.

"An enterprising young man," remarked Danilov with a wink at his comrades.

A minute later the ex-sergeant and the boy had become acquainted and in five minutes they were friends. In no time it had been established that young Valeri was a very fortunate lad. For one thing, his mother was something special—she was a mining engineer. Secondly, they were returning from their holiday and were going back to the mine where grandmother lived and where Valeri intended to go in for fishing, though it was only for fun that he fished, because his real aim in life was to become a mining engineer like his mother.

Further conversation revealed that Valeri's grandmother too was nothing like the grandmothers of the neighbours' children.

The boy dismissed all the other grandmothers with a sweep of his arm and pursed his lips in disdain. His grandmother was a Mother Heroine. "She's not a mother really, she's a granny," the boy whispered loudly into Danilov's ear with an air of giving away a family secret.

He did not have the slightest doubt on that score, because mothers were young and pretty like his.

"Well, well, well!" Voshchin marvelled. "And where's your dad? Also at the mine?"

Valeri's mother quickly turned her face from the

window, her eyes widened with anxiety. Danilov's heart contracted and, leaning forward, he made a sign to Voshchin.

"My dad hasn't come home yet, he's been fighting the fascists," the boy exclaimed eagerly. "Have you been fighting them too? Then you must have seen him."

The soldiers exchanged glances and felt uneasy. But Valeri went on.

"My dad's very big. Did you see him?"

"Look, young man," Danilov interrupted the child, "when you get home you see you go fishing straightaway. And then study to become an engineer. I know for sure that your dad will come home."

"But did you see him?"

"Yes, sonny, I saw him," there was a tremor in the sergeant's voice and he stared vacantly before him. With an aching heart he pictured the thousands of nameless graves on his country's fields and on the banks of the Bug, the Vistula and the Oder . . . he saw the rain falling on these tiny mounds, the tall grass growing around them, the boundless wheat fields spreading far and wide. "Here, sonny, let's have some music," and he lifted his huge accordion on to Valeri's knees. Noticing a grateful smile on the mother's face, he turned away and applied himself to striking a match.

"Try striking the other end," Voshchin said

"Shut up!" the sergeant snapped back.

Looking out of the window in Belov, the boy let out a shout that rang through the whole coach:

"Mama! They've hitched a tramcar to our train! A great big tramcar!"

"It's not a tram, my sweet, it's an electric locomotive," his mother explained quietly.

"That's a bright youngster," Voshchin remarked to Danilov as he listened to the boy's ringing voice.

Winding its way through the Salairsk mountain spurs, the train passed the small station of Artyshka. Green hills rolled back faster and faster, disappearing into the clear warm afternoon. A bracing wind blew through the open windows. At intervals the brief resonant hoots of the electric locomotives sounded above the clicking of the wheels. Trains bound in the opposite direction roared by like so many avalanches.

"Coal," Voshchin remarked, rubbing his knee with an air of satisfaction as if he himself had mined the contents of the strings of cars rushing past. "And that's Kuznetsk metal. They make aluminum there too, and machines, and—what do you call them—ferroalloys. That's the Kuznetsk basin for you!"

Light shadows crept over the soldiers' features, fleeting smiles appeared and vanished on their lips, and there was a concentrated look in their eyes.

How distant had his native parts seemed to Voshchin in January 1943 when for three days he dug for foothold into the frozen soil of a nameless snow-covered hillside ninety kilometres from Oryol, oblivious to the biting frost and the mortar shells exploding all around! The Kuznetsk basin had been far away indeed then, but even at the most trying moments he had never lost hope of returning to this rugged country which, for all the austerity of its landscape, he loved so much.

Spreading out its pure white sails, a cloud floated slowly over the distant hills. Nearer to the trackside, small white houses surrounded by neat little fenced-in gardens climbed up a hillside closer to the sun.

“That’s something new. Wasn’t there before the war,” observed Moiseyev and began hurriedly collecting his things. “The next station’s mine,” he said in obvious excitement. “It’s hard to believe I’m home at last—after five long years!”

At the platform of Prokopyevsk station they parted from Moiseyev with touching farewells. As the train pulled out, night was falling, and there were fewer passengers in the carriage. In the next compartment Valeri was being naughty

“He won’t go away, will he?” the boy kept asking over and over again “Will he let me play on his accordion?”

Danilov stood at the window, slowly smoothing his hair. The dusky evening landscape flew past, the telegraph wires now zoomed up, now dived down, and the wheels pounded out soon soon



CHAPTER I

WHEN the two men came up to the surface through the emergency exit, the grey cloud, now pink-capped and buttressed against the distant hills by two diagonal pillars of rain, was receding eastward and the last drops of the rainstorm coming down from a now clear sky were giving the earth a desultory sprinkling.

Drobot lit a cigarette and glanced at Rogov.

"This Kuznetsk earth of ours smells good, doesn't it? Especially after a good heavy downpour."

From the hillside the whole mining settlement was visible—the straight green streets, the tall white buildings, the rectangular gardens, the yellowish, concave bowl of the stadium, and, at intervals of two or three kilometres, the black cones of the waste dumps. The dumps were smouldering and over them curled bluish wisps of smoke.

Drobot walked ahead, carefully picking his way down the steep, slippery path. The pit manager was past fifty

and had the irritating old man's habit of mumbling, so that one had to strain one's ears to catch what he was saying. Rogov, who was anxious to hear what he had to say after inspecting the three sections making up Second District, clung to his heels. But Drobot seemed to have forgotten all about the mine as he pushed on, inhaling the heady, sourish odour of decaying pine bark and the delicate, subtle aroma of the autumn grasses, a smile spreading in a fine web of wrinkles on his broad, rugged features. His grey eyebrows grew upward, giving him a permanent look of surprise.

"Look at that parade of mines down there," Drobot said waving his hand toward the coal field. "The other day I read a few lines of poetry in a paper that went something like this: 'And the realm of black pyramids you enter as 'twere ancient Egypt's land' The realm part's good enough, but Egypt's out of place: it's all desert there while here life's seething both above and below the ground."

Looking at the cone-shaped waste dumps of the neighbouring mines, he winked slyly.

"Some competitors! Last year, before you came, we signed an emulation agreement with them. They were full of dash then—said they'd beat us hollow. But that's where they're mistaken!" He drew up sharply and, swinging around to half-face Rogov, almost shouted. "And this isn't just fancy talk either—can't stand hot air. I'm telling you this for your own good, because I can see you've got a head on your shoulders, though you may be a bit restive. Been watching you for more'n a month now and I think you'll do."

Rogov frowned. Anticipating a retort, the pit manager raised his hand and continued.

"Yes, restless! Trying to do everything at once. You're too busy with the production cycle, ideas about timbering and that Chinakal shield to bother about getting the coal up. That won't do. I'd advise you to keep your mind on one thing: the plan's got to be fulfilled—even if you have to carry the coal to the surface in your hats, or by the handful."

"And so on till the end of time, I suppose?" Rogov snapped back.

Drobot, busy with his own thoughts, ignored the remark.

"You see, we've got our traditions in this mine. Last May it happened that we fell a bit behind plan. What did I do? Chased all the pen-pushers from the office to the pit—and let me tell you, output jumped. There'll be plenty of time to think about production cycles and shields, man! Our neighbours aren't worrying about such things yet either."

Drobot took pride in having the pit well in hand and would not countenance the introduction of any innovation or change without his knowledge. Rogov was told as much when he was given his appointment here as district engineer.

Drobot and Rogov were followed into the pit manager's office by a dark, keen-eyed youth, the senior statistician at the pit. Without so much as a glance in the newcomer's direction, Drobot went over to the window and opened it. Then he shifted his chair slightly out of alignment with the desk and turned to a bookcase with some dusty volumes standing against the wall.

"Well?" he said finally in a menacing tone.

"It wasn't my fault, Pyotr Mikhailovich . . ." the young man's voice cracked.

Slowly Drobot turned around and raised his eyebrows.

"Not your fault? I'll make you bring up that point one per cent by the handful! And from the toughest seam too! Understand?"

Rogov realized these were the repercussions of an incident that had occurred that morning. After the senior statistician had reported the pit's exact output to trust headquarters, Drobot, looking over the reports from other mines, discovered that his figure was point one per cent less than his neighbours'. Orders were immediately issued to report the lacking fraction to the trust office, but the people there took the correction in bad part and complained to the manager. This threw Drobot into a fury and he blamed the "pen-pushers" for making a mistake.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

The young man fidgeted uncomfortably

"I'll take the measly lot out of today's output," Drobot went on. "That'll take care of it. But I'll have you remember, young man, that next time you get ideas you'd better see me first. Whoever heard of such a thing: every man jack of you tries to run the place, but I'm the one who has to answer to the state." Drobot made a gesture of annoyance. "You'd better get back to work," he said to the young man, and turned to Rogov.

"I liked your workings," he said. "They're neat."

Rogov caught himself feeling flattered by this praise, but promptly put it out of his mind. He felt the moment was favourable for seeing through an idea he had been nursing latterly.

"Pyotr Mikhailovich," he began hesitantly, as if the suggestion he was about to make had just occurred to

him. "Don't you think the plan for District Two might be increased somewhat?"

Drobot snorted.

"What's the idea?" he said dubiously.

"Well, you saw those two new seams we stripped ahead of schedule. You could start working them right now."

"Well, go ahead," the chief smiled good-naturedly. "Those seams of yours will give us five or six per cent. . . ."

"Even more!"

"Just a moment," Drobot's thin lips tightened with impatience. "I mean five or six per cent over and above plan. Do you realize the whip hand that gives us? Our neighbours will turn green with envy. We'll beat them all right and who knows but what your above-plan seams may help us to score. So keep it to yourself for the time being!" Drobot quite unexpectedly winked, burst out laughing and patted Rogov on the shoulder.

Somewhat taken aback by such outspokenness, Rogov did not know what to say for a moment. Then, remembering that he probably would not see Drobot until the next day, he asked:

"Have you looked at my memo, Pyotr Mikhailovich? It's urgent."

"Memo?" Drobot made a vague gesture. His face clouded. "Oh yes, the memo. . . . Sorry, I haven't read it . . . haven't had the time you know . . . I'm a busy man, a soldier, so to say. I passed it on to Filenkov. You'd better see him."

While he was waiting to see the chief engineer, Rogov's thoughts kept returning to the inspection tour of the work-

ings he had made that day with the pit manager. There was no doubt about it, Drobot knew his business well . . . so well, one might even envy him. Perhaps for that one ought to overlook his rather gruff manner, the finality of his opinions, and his precipitate, almost thoughtless, way of arriving at decisions. True he laid rather too much stress on his concern for the reputation of the mine. Rogov could not help feeling that it was his own reputation Drobot was really concerned about. And then that incident today with the percentages!

Rogov remembered Nefedov, another district engineer, telling him that Drobot had come to the Kapitalnaya Pit at the very end of the war. He had previously worked at a mine development site, and from all indications had made quite a good job of it, although rumour had it that his managerial methods had been somewhat highhanded.

"The devil knows what's happened to him," Nefedov had snorted. "Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that he hasn't been able to get things going at Kapitalnaya. He seems to think he can run things here too by just issuing orders. It must look pretty bad even to outsiders, don't you think so, Pavel Gordeyevich?"

Drobot had been taken to task on several occasions by trust headquarters and by the City Committee of the Communist Party, but there was no appreciable improvement. In the meanwhile time went on, confronting the pit with more and more difficult tasks which could be coped with only by working in a new way. But Drobot continued simply to issue orders and was always harking back to the good old traditions of the pit, although he really accepted only one of these traditions: the plan had to be fulfilled at all costs.

But even that grew increasingly harder to do.

"Now where does the trouble really lie?" Nefedov had asked at a recent meeting. "It's time we went into the matter properly. We have the same forces as before and more machines. . ."

"The plan's been increased by three hundred tons," Drobot growled. "We're pretty good at asking questions, but when it comes to work you've got to admit we're just blundering along."

Nefedov, relating this incident, said:

"I was so taken aback that I didn't know what to say. What I should have said was that the miners were working as hard as ever to fulfil the plan, but some of the executives were relying too much on Drobot and had ceased to think in terms of tomorrow as well as today, forgetting that we've got to keep forging ahead. That's the crux of the matter."

High Output Days—HODs they were called—were announced more and more often at the pit. On these days the plan was surpassed, but to achieve this everybody was sent down below—even the canteen cooks—and all auxiliary departments were closed for the day.

No end of pretexts for HODs were invented. Either it was a "flying start" that was needed at the beginning of the month, or else a "push" and a "gathering in of loose ends" at the close of each ten-day span. This sort of spurt-ing did not help much, however, for output was almost inevitably bound to drop after each spurt, work at the faces was thrown out of rhythm and the pit as a whole seemed to be assailed by a fit of the ague.

"It's six of one and half a dozen of the other," Rogov had once heard an old miner remark.

"We're always running about like mad—there isn't time for a decent night's sleep," Nefedov had complained.

"We've got the men and the machines but we don't use our heads when it comes to organizing the work."

Rogov sought to make the first practical step toward improving the state of affairs when he wrote a memo setting forth his views as to the pit's basic tasks, which essentially resolved themselves to one thing—increase of output. The remedy lay in a smoothly operating production cycle. To achieve this, however, a multitude of complex measures had to be carried out. The job of the moment was to decide which of these to tackle first.

Drobot had evaded the issue. There was nothing for it but to see what the chief engineer would have to say.

At the beginning of his interview with the chief engineer, Rogov could not help smiling—Filenkov's manner of speech and even his choice of words were so much like Drobot's that he seemed to be deliberately imitating the chief. But was he the only one here who did that?

"The memo? I'll look at it when I have time," Filenkov said, failing to suppress a yawn. "Still looking for the hitch, eh?" he added, irritably.

"Right, Fyodor Lukich. I'm still looking."

"Don't you think that's a rather antiquated approach to the matter?"

"No. Do you?"

"I?" Filenkov shifted his bulk in the chair. "I'm the chief cook and bottlerwasher around here. I haven't the time to build castles in the air."

"You mean to say that a coordinated work cycle is a pipe dream?" Rogov retorted, scowling.

"I am talking of existing possibilities. . . ." Filenkov returned with obvious reluctance.

"So am I! All my conclusions are based on existing possibilities." Rogov walked around the desk and stopped next to the chief engineer. "Fyodor Lukich, it seems to me that people who expect possibilities to drop from the sky are forgetting the basic thing in our work: that we must always try to measure up to the best. Isn't this a sort of offensive we are conducting? And that means that we've got to hold the lines taken by the forward unit."

Filenkov scratched his thinning pate with a plump little finger.

"Spoken like a true soldier! But, to stick to army parlance, what you're proposing is that we hold a sector we haven't taken yet. If you take up the question of the cycle with our Drobot he'll flare up at once: 'Where are we going to find the miners? And what about transport?' "

"But you're the chief engineer."

Filenkov smiled dryly. "That's not news to me..."

He was about to say something more when the two telephones on his desk jangled at once and the conversation was interrupted.

The chief engineer was ten years or so younger than Drobot. He seemed to know his job well enough, but what infuriated Rogov was his inertia, his apathetic indifference toward anything outside of production routine, and anything not included in the daily work schedule. True, there were times when something seemed to spring to life in this awkward taciturn man, and his tiny grey eyes would light up for a while, but then he would promptly withdraw into himself once more, his face sagging again, and only his heavy underlip set as before in a stubborn line.

Yet there was something in Filenkov that appealed to Rogov. Perhaps it was his great practical experience,

experience. the younger engineer was himself so eager to acquire. But what was the use of all this experience if no one benefited by it?

"Essentially the production cycle is a simple proposition, especially if we dissect it into its elements," Rogov resumed the conversation. "There are three shifts a day. One shift prepares the seam for conveying; if it is a horizontal or inclined seam, you undercut it by machine, drill the boreholes, move up the conveyor, and timber. Finally you blast. The next two shifts bring up the coal. That's how it should be."

"Right. That's how it should be," Filenkov readily conceded. "However, there is an opinion, old and deep-seated and hard to overcome, that a pit is not a factory or a pastry shop; here the worker is always shifting from place to place. Consequently the working conditions change. You can't provide for every eventuality: one face may be prepared in eight hours and another may take sixteen. Sometimes two shifts might suffice to bring the coal up and at other times three mightn't be enough. That's the prevailing view."

"But surely you don't share it!" Rogov's eyes bored into the chief engineer. "It's sheer chaos!"

Filenkov raised a cautioning hand.

"Aren't you putting it too strongly, Pavel Gordeyevich? This isn't my first year at Kapitalnaya. In my time we've tried to introduce the cycle method at the face on at least ten different occasions."

"And what came of it?" Rogov was somewhat taken aback.

"As you can see, nothing." The chief engineer's smile was almost friendly. He looked thoughtful for a moment, and his face became at once graver and more animated.

"True," he went on slowly, "things were better then . . . that was in the late Nikolai Ilyich's time. . . ." Filenkov sighed and his face clouded. "But the fact remains that the Kapitalnaya is coming along as it is. We are turning out coal no worse than the others and doing it without any cycle. To apply the cycle properly you need skilled hewers, and not a dozen or two but two hundred and sixty a shift. We have a lot of manoeuvring to do every day and every shift to manage with what we've got. . . ."

"And how long do you think this manoeuvring will have to go on?"

"That's for the coal field administration to decide."

"I don't agree with you," Rogov said, rising. "No, Fyodor Lukich, we have to decide ourselves! We've got the people, only they must be encouraged to do things. Do you really think we ought to wait for special instructions from somewhere or other?"

Filenkov sighed, thrust his chin forward and, turning his head from side to side, ran a finger under the collar of his shirt, sighed again and finally gave in reluctantly

"If you'll sit down for a moment I'll read your memorandum while you're here."

At first his eyes skimmed over the lines, then, his interest evidently aroused, he settled down to reading it slowly and carefully to the end.

"Very good," he said. "I'll endorse your time schedule. But don't forget that I can't give you any guarantee of success. And so far as Drobot is concerned, you'll have to answer to him yourself. . . ."

"I didn't want any guarantees anyway," Rogov grinned. "Thanks for the schedule."

He rejoiced at his first victory, small though it was.

Next came negotiations with the people in charge of

the timber stores and transport. The former promised to provide the standard pit props needed according to timetable, but the supply of empties and haulage from the face turned out to be the snag. Even a talk with Drobot did not help. There was nothing to do but wait two whole days for the return of Semyon Starodubtsev, the transport chief, from the head office.

Rogov and Starodubtsev were old acquaintances; they had attended the same institute in Tomsk. Semyon Starodubtsev had been an excellent student and a pleasant comrade. Together the two had presented their diploma projects and together they had dreamed of the future of the Kuznetsk coal basin, trying to picture what it would be like in five or ten years' time. Enthusiastically they applied themselves to plans for all-round mechanization of pits from face to the final transport operation. But two months after they began working as engineers, the war separated them. When Rogov returned to the mine, his first visit was to Starodubtsev.

Starodubtsev had given him a warm welcome "Good lad! Glad to see you back hale and hearty. And look at the row of decorations you've got! But what else could you expect of a former miner?"

"Why former?"

"Well, after all, it wasn't exactly mining you were doing out there, was it? Must have forgotten a good bit. Don't let that worry you though—we'll help you to get the hang of things soon enough. How about dropping in tonight for a chat and a drink to celebrate the homecoming?"

Rogov went to see his old friend that evening. He was rather surprised to find that Starodubtsev was already the father of a family.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Starodubtsev replied in his deep voice, rubbing his hands. "We may have been kept pretty busy bringing up coal at the pit, but we didn't let that interfere with our private lives. I've got two daughters already. Alla will soon be a year—she's asleep now," Starodubtsev nodded in the direction of the next room. "And Vera—she's three—is at her grandmother's. And as you can guess, I've got a wife too. I want you to meet her," he added as an afterthought and shouted: "Klava, what about a drink for Pavel Gordeyevich and me?"

"Again? My God, when is this going to stop?" came a sleepy voice from the kitchen

Starodubtsev grinned sheepishly

"She's a bit strait-laced, you know ... Sorry, old man."

The two men talked about old acquaintances.

"Kolka Sementsov?" Starodubtsev made a gesture of disgust. "Oh, he's gone up in the world. Gone way beyond the rest of us—been manager of the trust for more than a year now. I saw him at a conference some time ago but we didn't have a chance to talk."

"Swell-headed?"

"Well, you wouldn't say so to look at him. If you ask me, it's all a matter of scope. He's manager of four pits and I'm only in charge of underground transport in one—not a very big job, as you know yourself." Semyon winked slyly. "Now don't go thinking I'm after the big jobs and decorations and that sort of thing. Nothing of the sort. All I want is to keep pace with everybody else and support my family properly."

As Rogov recalled this conversation, it occurred to him that either he had not really known Starodubtsev in their school days or else the man had changed completely.

As Rogov now walked into Starodubtsev's office the transport chief greeted him with only a casual nod.

"Hello. Excuse me for a moment while I get rid of this partisan."

The "partisan" was a stocky snub-nosed youth with intelligent, slightly bulging eyes. He was standing in front of the desk and looking at the chief with bold unconcern.

"What are you staring at me for?" Starodubtsev shouted

The young man pursed his lips.

"Got nothing else to do."

"None of your impudence, d'you hear?"

"I hear you all right."

"I'll take you to court, you cub . . ."

"You can't frighten me The courts are Soviet . . ."

"Hear that?" Starodubtsev turned to Rogov. "How do you like his cheek! Listen here. . ." he again shouted at the lad, "do you understand what you're letting yourself in for? See that slogan: 'All forces for the fulfilment of the Postwar Five-Year Plan!' All forces, get it? And at a time like this you refuse to carry out orders . . ."

"Because you're breaking the law," the lad replied in a level voice " I was taught to be a coal hewer and you think you can put me any old place."

"The state can put you anywhere it sees fit!"

"The state, yes, but not you . . ."

Starodubtsev leapt to his feet, beside himself with rage, and striking a tragic pose, pointed to the door.

"Get out!" he hissed

The coal hewer shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the room

Lighting a cigarette nervously, the transport chief began complaining about the lack of a sense of responsibility among the miners.

"I've got an urgent matter to discuss with you, Semyon," Rogov interrupted the tirade.

"About the trams?" Starodubtsev bristled. "You can't have them! The mine's having a hard time of it as it is—no rest night or day, and here you come with your experiment!"

"The production cycle's no experiment!"

"Well, I'm not giving you any trams. I'd already made up my mind to complain about the way you've taken things into your own hands. You've been grabbing empties right and left. More than once the dispatcher on duty has phoned me: 'Rogov's at it again!' "

"In other words, you won't give me any?"

"No use even asking."

Rogov walked out without another word.

CHAPTER II

The empties were the cause of another clash the very next day.

"I'll complain to the chief!" the transport foreman shouted after Rogov.

"You can complain to the devil himself if you wish," the engineer replied good-naturedly, satisfied that the coal would be moving without a hitch that day.

At that point he heard Starodubtsev shouting angrily in one of the drifts. There was a second voice too—it belonged to an elderly drift miner named Voshchin, a man who rarely lost his temper.

“Take orders from you?” the miner roared. “Who are you to issue orders if you haven’t got a kopek’s worth of sense!”

“The state put me here to give orders, and I’m not going to allow. . . .”

“It isn’t the state’s fault if you don’t know your job.”

“I won’t allow it!” Starodubtsev’s voice rose to a treble. Seeing Rogov approach he turned on him. “Here’s the result of your management—I hope you’re satisfied! This fellow goes ahead and steals four sections of track from the cross-gallery and begins laying a siding. What for, I’d like to know! It isn’t in the day’s assignment ”

“So’s to cut the hauling distance by two hundred metres,” Voshchin put in calmly and began driving a spike into a tie with furious blows.

“And who gave you permission?”

“I gave the orders to take the rails,” Rogov said, and turning deliberately to the miner, he inquired about the shift.

“You needn’t worry,” the miner replied, “I don’t mind driving in spikes, but I want to get back to the face as soon as possible.”

“Very well. . .” the transport chief began slowly, in an ominous tone. “I’ve put up with your tricks long enough, Pavel. Now I’m through! As far as I am concerned the interests of the mine are more important than personal friendship. We shall take this up in the proper quarters.”

“Listen here. . .” Rogov spun around to face Starodubtsev so fast that the beam of his battery lamp cut across the uprights like a flash of lightning.

The encounter might have taken a more serious turn had not a foreman appeared around the corner of the gallery at that moment and come racing toward them

"Trouble, Pavel Gordeyevich, there's trouble at the face," he shouted from the distance. "The roof's slipped!"

"Hear that?" Starodubtsev said, and there was a note of satisfaction in his voice. "I warned you your production cycle notions are a risky proposition with the kind of roof we've got."

Rogov flashed his lamp beam across Starodubtsev's lean, slightly pock-marked face as if deleting him from the conversation and began questioning the foreman about the condition of the seam.

The foreman gave him a detailed account.

"Who gave you permission to violate the technological rules?" Rogov barely restrained his rising anger. "Why didn't you gob it?"

"What could I do?" the foreman protested. "The section superintendent ordered another two sets to be fired. I told him the roof would not take it, but he insisted on having it his way."

The section in question had been added to Rogov's district only a week before, but they had managed to make considerable headway there in that short time; among other things, they had restored a seam that had caved in, the very one where the mishap had now taken place. That made the occurrence all the more regrettable.

As they passed through a crosscut Rogov heard somebody calmly hacking away with an axe in the working where the slip had happened.

"A hewer most likely," replied the foreman to the engineer's unspoken question.

"What do you mean by letting anyone go in there?"

"He's doing it on his own. . . ."

Rogov swore and bellowed into the working:

"Hey! Get down from there, quick!"

There was a rustle of fine coal in the chute and a moment later a small, elderly man appeared in the narrow arched opening at the foot. He dusted his knees carefully, and squatted down against the gallery wall, his eyes twinkling merrily. This infuriated Rogov still more.

"Who are you?"

The miner coughed.

"Nekrasov's the name."

"What were you doing at the face? Who do you suppose has to answer for your safety?" Rogov shouted at him. He felt the blood rushing to his face.

The miner coughed again.

"Nobody need answer for me. I just propped up the sore spot. The seam should settle down now. . . ."

The miner's calm manner and twinkling eyes cooled Rogov's anger. Recovering his composure, he asked:

"Are you a member of the Party?"

"I am."

"Ask your Party group organizer to see me. Tell him the district engineer wants to speak to him."

"When?"

"Whenever it suits him."

The miner stood up.

"I'm the group organizer. . . . So you needn't worry."

Rogov's eyes dropped under the other's level gaze in which he read paternal forbearance and a gentle reproach.

Two hours later they bumped into each other in the shower house. Rogov saw to it that he got under the shower next to the old miner's. The latter probably understood how the engineer felt, and perhaps it was this that prompted him to make the first move.

"Need any soap?" he asked.

The conversation got into swing as they were dressing

"Shouting's all very well, of course," the miner said, changing into a neatly pressed suit, "it's a good way to let off steam. I myself sometimes shout a bit at my old woman and it does me no end of good. But some folks go about yelling for no good reason."

When the two parted, Rogov gave the miner a hearty handclasp.

"It's all right," responded the latter. "I've got a lot of respect for you. Had my eye on you for some time now."

CHAPTER III

Dusk dimmed the cold, pink light over the distant hills lining the river front, and in the east a grey, ragged cloud crept slowly over the mountain top.

It was Saturday and the streets were livelier than usual. People were hurrying to the club or taking a leisurely stroll in the warmth of the waning summer. A group of miners from Kapitalnaya stopped on the opposite side of the street in animated discussion. Rogov could not hear what they were saying but it was obvious that the talk was warm and friendly.

Suddenly a sharp feeling of loneliness seized him. Here he was with nobody to talk to. But he had only himself to blame for not finding his place in the community sooner.

How he missed Valya! How he would like to take her hand now, look into her eyes and speak—just one word!

Rogov turned away from the window, picked his cap off the rack and went out, slamming the door behind him. What a fool he had been not to ask Nekrasov for his address. He could not think of anything he would

have liked more than to spend the evening with the old miner. And now he did not know what to do with himself.

Failing to find anyone he knew at the club, he was about to leave when he bumped into Annushka Yermolaeva, the technician. He had seen her many times before in the technical department of the office.

"I couldn't help feeling sorry for you standing there looking as if you were afraid to move for fear you'd knock somebody down," she said with a warm smile. "It must be awful to be so big."

Rogov laughed. "You're not far wrong. Judging by you, people here are rather on the small side."

The girl had to raise her head to look at him, and this imparted a somewhat rapt expression to her smooth white face.

Even at this close range she looked like a little girl. Her slender figure was girded at the waist with a coloured belt, her luxuriant chestnut hair braided into a thick plait, and there was a look of impish curiosity in her wide-open grey eyes fringed by thick lashes. Yet there was something about the resolute set of her shoulders, the hint of stubbornness about her lips and the way she tossed her little head that suggested a mature personality.

A bell rang announcing the beginning of the performance.

"Give me your hand, Pavel Gordeyevich, and I'll steer you safely into the hall," she said.

After the show they left the club together. Annushka was silent. When they came to the wooden bridge over the river, they stopped.

"Isn't it wonderful," breathed Annushka

"Isn't what wonderful?"

"I was thinking of the film we just saw. Some movies have a way of making you think. When you look at them you laugh at the funny bits, and it's only afterwards that the great truth in them dawns on you. . . . Tell me," she asked him suddenly, "how does it feel to be working here after being at the front? I've been hearing all sorts of talk at the mine. Some are for you, some are against you. Some say you know what you're about, others say you're just restless. What do you think yourself?"

"Me?" Rogov hesitated. "I think I'm pretty much like everybody else."

"Like Drobot?"

Rogov could not help laughing. "Now, that is mean of you, really! I don't know whether I'm better or worse than Drobot, but I'm certainly not like him."

"Tell me, do you like working at our mine?"

"Suppose I say I don't."

"I shan't believe you."

"Why not?"

Annushka sighed. Fingering the kerchief, draped over her shoulders, she glanced about her and said in a low voice that was almost a whisper:

"Because there isn't a finer place on earth than this! Understand? There really isn't! Everything is so new here, so young and vital. . . The people, the work, even the songs we sing are somehow better."

"Are those the only reasons?"

"No. . . It was here that my real, grown-up life began."

"And how old may this grown-up woman be?" Rogov inquired.

"Nineteen! You see? But we were talking about you. . . ."

"About the mine, you mean," Rogov amended and lapsed into silence.

The river conversed sleepily with the pebbles by the shore. Night hovered over the warm earth. Above the crest of the hill a large orange moon hung in the sky. A humming of motors came from the direction of the nearest pit. Over on the railway track a small yard engine puffed industriously and the sound of girlish voices singing in chorus came from somewhere on the hill. The whole scene breathed such peace and tranquility that Rogov involuntarily held his breath. His voice had a ring of earnestness in it when he finally spoke.

"Annushka," he began slowly. "Those were very fine words you said, but I would put it differently: there isn't a better place in the world than this vast land of ours. . . . Our native land. Thousands upon thousands of versts, and all ours. And that is the main thing. That is why everything in this land is so dear to us—the mine, the pit, the people. It is night now and everything is hushed and silent. But suppose you and I could do the impossible—suppose we could catch hold of the edge of the Kuzbas land at the foot of the Alatau range and tip it up. . . . What do you think we would see? The darkness up here would suddenly be flooded with light. Can't you picture those mines, all those men working there at the face, can't you hear the rumble rising to the very skies?"

Rogov took a deep breath, his shoulders sagged and he wound up in a rather flat voice.

"Those lights over there to the left—that's our mine. But something is clearly wrong at Kapitalnaya. Look! Some of the seams are dark. Why is nobody working there? And not far from the pit bottom stands a whole train loaded with coal. Why is it standing? Why isn't

the driver in a hurry to be off? Isn't that sufficient reason for quarrelling with the chief of the underground transport?"

Annushka laughed softly.

"You started off with poetry. . . ."

"And ended with prose?" Rogov finished for her. "Well, there you have the whole story of why I am restless."

"Yes. . ." said the girl, shivering a little in the cool night breeze. "You're quite right. Now I know it can never be dull for you here!"

"Let's talk about something else," Rogov proposed.

"What shall we talk about? I can't talk about the stars."

"Neither can I."

"Then let's keep quiet, although Kolya Dubintsev keeps telling me that I don't know how to be quiet."

"Kolya Dubintsev?"

"Yes. . . the technician. . . . He's foreman now in your fifth section. Do you mean to say you don't know him? He's. . ." she hesitated for a moment, then wound up resolutely: "He's a very good friend of mine."

"Why, of course I know him!" Rogov remembered. "He's not very tall, but he's athletic. And his eyes . . . his eyes sparkle like the stone on that ring you're wearing?"

"That's the one!" Annushka cried delighted. "He's nice, isn't he?"

And because the question sounded too much like a confession, she said quickly to cover her confusion:

"Do you mind seeing me home, Pavel Gordeyevich?"

As they walked along the swaying boardwalk dappled with moonlight, Rogov suddenly remembered that he had scheduled Dubintsev for work that evening although it was not his shift. The matter had been urgent, yet now he felt conscience-stricken at the thought that the lad was

down there the mine, working while he, Rogov, strolled in the moonlight with his girl. The shift was due to end at midnight. For all he knew they might meet Kolya coming out. That would be awkward!

He hurriedly took leave of Annushka and walked on alone for a while, feeling suddenly depressed. Why, he wondered? Was it because he was thirty? Rubbish! Perhaps it was because things were not going smoothly at work? That was a difficult question to answer. A mine wasn't a hothouse where everything was laid out in neat order. And was there really any need for such order? Perhaps not, but a beginning certainly had to be made, things had to be got going in earnest. And the sooner the better!

He reached the house quickly and was about to go in when he noticed a light in the window of the neighbouring apartment where Khomyakov, the mine surveyor, lived. He knocked at the door. The Khomyakovs had visitors—Nefedov, the district engineer, and Olenka Pozdnyakova, Khomyakov's wife's niece.

The mine surveyor laid aside his newspaper, shifted his spectacles onto his sun-tanned forehead and invited Rogov to sit down and have some tea.

"Try some of this jam with it," he said, pushing a blue cutglass bowl toward his guest "Maria Dmitrievna made it herself."

Rogov did not know what it was that drew him to this elderly couple. They lived quietly and unobtrusively. The surveyor's chief interest was world affairs, given the slightest provocation he would hold forth on his favourite subject for hours at a time, while his wife, Maria Dmitrievna, listened respectfully, nodding her head in silent agreement and sighing audibly.

Nefedov, whom Rogov saw here for the first time, was a man of impulsive, excitable temperament; passionately devoted to his work and a jealous champion of "his district," "his plan," "his brigades." A short man and rather heavily built, he was always rushing about the pit hunting for something, arranging and adjusting things. His face wore a permanent expression in which delight, amazement and alarm were intermingled, as though he had just made some tremendous discovery and was not quite certain what to do about it. Rogov had met him many times before but had never exchanged more than a few words with him.

Olenka Pozdnyakova worked as a stenographer in the office of the local newspaper and always had a fund of fresh news of all kinds. But since she seldom had the patience to give a coherent, consecutive recital, the result was rather a curious hodgepodge of information.

Now, too, Olenka had in the space of five minutes reported briefly on the results of the latest session of the General Assembly, announced that the Ukraine was completing the grain harvest, that a new film had appeared on the screen, that the Barnaul-Stalinsk-Abakan railway line was to be laid within ten kilometres of the collieries, that Yesaulova, a motor operator in Pit No. 9, had given birth to triplets, that the editor of the city newspaper was down with the flu.

Having rattled all this off in one breath, Olenka applied herself with like zeal to the home-made scones, relinquishing the floor to Gerasim Petrovich who launched into a lengthy discussion of the news his niece had brought. Nefedov listened smiling, his arms resting on the back of his chair, his chin pressed against his

shoulder as though he were examining some curious object.

Rogov usually confined himself to a few brief remarks, but tonight he felt an urge to speak his mind. No sooner had the surveyor touched on the behaviour of the Anglo-American allies in the General Assembly than Rogov interrupted him. The best way to support the Soviet diplomats in their difficult task, he said, would be to do big things here at home.

"Quite right," Khomyakov quickly assented. "Our diplomats have our people, two hundred million strong, behind them!"

"That's it!" Nefedov caught up with evident satisfaction.

"I'm not talking about the people in general, I mean the mine!" Rogov broke in sternly, placing his large clenched fists on the table. "And not only the mine. . . I mean us, the way we are working now and the way we ought to be working. . . . Tell me frankly, Gerasim Petrovich, can't you see how badly the pits are doing, even those that are fulfilling the plan?"

"Now, now," exclaimed Khomyakov in mock fright. "I know, Pavel Gordeyevich, that we aren't doing as well as we might! Sometimes I too itch for a fight on that score. The trouble is I don't know what to fight against!"

"Against conservatism!" Rogov almost shouted, causing his hostess to jump and Olenka to look up in surprise at the wrathful face of the guest.

"That's it, that's it!" Nefedov put in, looking pleased again and turning with a sudden swift movement of his whole body to face Rogov.

"Conservatism. That's pretty vague, isn't it?" Khomyakov remarked in a calmer tone.

Rogov moved back his chair, rose and paced up and down the room with long steps.

"We cannot allow things to go on like this," he said with a resolute gesture of his hand. "No. I've spent a lot of time trying to trace the causes, trying to find out why labour productivity in the pits is increasing so slowly and why it is actually dropping in some places. . . ."

"We ought to consult the miners about it," Gerasim Petrovich said, rising in his turn.

Rogov stopped in his tracks and spread out his hands.

"Do you think I haven't? Why, man, I've talked to dozens of them. And what they told me has set me thinking along very definite lines."

"And what conclusion have you come to?" Nefedov inquired, glancing at Rogov uncertainly, as though doubting in advance whether he could be right.

"The production cycle! That's the basic thing! A cast-iron schedule of work is what we need if we want to get worth-while results."

"Everything will come in time," Khomyakov remarked.

"In how much time?" Rogov's eyes seemed to darken. "No! There may be some who wouldn't mind sitting back and riding comfortably into communism, but that's not our way. And nobody is going to let us be mere passengers. We might be told to get off to make room for more important freight!"

"He's right, damn it!" Nefedov said and burst out laughing. "But, as for the cycle, Pavel Gordeyevich. . . ."

"What about it?"

"Well, you know yourself what a tough problem that is. We haven't enough miners to work at the face. . . ."

"Rubbish," Rogov cut in sharply. "Rubbish, Vasili Vasil'yevich! And you know it as well as anyone. Wait a

minute." He pulled a dog-eared notebook out of his pocket, opened it and read aloud: "Total number of hewers, 102, total required per shift, 76, number actually reporting, 63-64. These figures. . ."

"...are for my district, I know!" Nefedov put in quickly.

"How do you account for the shortage of 12 to 13 miners every shift?"

"Sounds like a regular production conference," Kholmjakov chuckled with a merry wink to Olenka, who was looking bored.

But Rogov and Nefedov ignored the interruption. They stood facing each other. Rogov spoke without moving, his head cocked slightly to one side, but Nefedov gesticulated excitedly, his wide-set brown eyes now blazing with anger, now twinkling with amusement.

"You have the academic approach, that's the trouble!" he kept repeating. "Yes, yes, and don't try to deny it. All you can say is 'it must be so.' But, my dear fellow, who doesn't know such established truths as the number of miners needed for a given job? But after all we're dealing with a mine. I send ten hewers to work at the face in one section, straight at the seam, but as luck will have it a gallery roof begins to settle. Where do I get the workers to prop it up?"

"Don't tell me you use the hewers?" Rogov queried incredulously.

"Of course. We're always having to take one or two men off the face."

Rogov shook his head.

"Vasili Vasilyevich," he said, "when do you estimate our pit will complete the five-year plan?"

Nefedov looked nonplussed.

"I don't see what that has to do with the number of miners working at the face. When will we complete the five-year plan? In five years, of course."

There was a twinkle in Rogov's eyes as he shook his head.

"Call yourself district engineer! What do you say to four years? What do you say to three and a half?"

Nefedov was about to speak, but checked himself, and turning to glance at the surveyor shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid I'll have to refer you to Drobot on that point. You know what he'll say, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. He'll say: 'the other mines aren't bothering about it, why should we?'"

"What do you propose to do then?"

"The same as I proposed before: fight!"

The eleven-o'clock siren blew at the mine. Nefedov had to hurry off to work.

"So you intend to fight?" he said in parting. "Perhaps you'll be wanting some volunteers?" He paused for a moment and added in a half-whisper: "I must confess, Pavel Gordeyevich, that I came here tonight on the chance that I might see you. You can enlist me in your army."

A brief silence followed Nefedov's departure. Rogov finished his tea and chinking his hosts went out to the balcony.

"Did you hear what they were talking about?" Khomyakov asked his wife, excitedly fingering a thin tuft of hair hanging over his high forehead.

"I did," she replied. "They're just like you, always got some new idea . . . don't like this and don't like that. And that machine of yours doesn't give anyone any peace. . . ."

"Hush, mother!" Gerasim Petrovich threw a quick glance in Rogov's direction. "You can't compare an old man's notion with . . . with the real thing."

"Rubbish!" retorted Maria Dmitrievna. "Look at all that paper you used up on your drawings."

Gerasim Petrovich sighed.

"You don't know what you're talking about, mother. I'm too old to keep up with the youngsters any more. . . ." He indicated Rogov. "See the sort of fellows we've got now? That young man could be a member of the Council of Ministers and no mistake."

"He's a handsome chap too," Maria Dmitrievna said suddenly.

Olenka laughed. "Go on!"

"Now don't you go putting on any airs," the older woman turned on her sternly. "It's not easy for him living all alone like that."

Rogov was leaning over the balustrade. Again that restless gnawing ache, that yearning to be off somewhere. . . . But where? It was not the distant seas, mountains and foreign lands that beckoned to him. He had done enough travelling during the war.

For a moment it seemed to him that he still stood at the window of the train compartment searching with a poignant ache for the contours of the familiar hills, seeing the green twilight in the hollows and the shining curve of the Kondoma like a giant sword of old. But all this was here now before his eyes! The mountains, the hollows and the river—he had only to stretch out his hand to touch the earth that had put him on his feet, made a man of him, stirred his heart for the first time.

In the garden below he saw two figures pause. The moonlight was so bright that he could see its pale reflec-

tion in their faces. He saw the lad lay his hand on the girl's shoulder and heard him say falteringly:

"Annushka!"

Rogov felt that he too could clearly distinguish the girl's face, no, not her whole face, only the soft curve of her cheek and the rounded chin. She stood with her face half averted as if waiting for the young man to speak, and yet not so much waiting as simply looking pensively into the distance where the mine lights twinkled.

"Annushka," the lad repeated, "I . . ."

"Don't . . ." the girl replied. "Don't say it, I know. . . ."

Rogov saw her take his hand and press it to her cheek, then he heard her speak and though the words were inaudible to him he guessed that they must be words of tenderness because the two young people laughed happily, and with their arms about each other's waists walked out of the garden. When they reached the gate the young man suddenly stopped and, in a voice that showed him to be oblivious to everything but his happiness, he said:

"If you only knew, Annushka, how I'm going to work now!"

Rogov chuckled. So Dubintsev had found Annushka after all.

"Enjoying the view, Pavel Gordeyevich?" Olenka called from the open balcony door.

"No," Rogov replied brusquely, without turning around. "Just exercising a miner's right to fresh air."

He went straight from the balcony to his large room. Switching on the light he stood for a while by the wall rubbing his temples. What an eventful evening it had been! Yet nothing had helped—not the movies, not the talk with Annushka nor the visit to the Khomyakovs. He felt restless. He decided to try a book and took one off the

shelf, but half an hour later he laid it down. The story was so insipid that he could not force himself to follow it.

There was a knock at the door. He opened it and took the proffered telegram with studied calm. But the moment the messenger had left he tore it open.

"Got my degree. Expect me in autumn en route. Valya."

Rogov sat down at the table, propped his head on his hands and closed his eyes tight.

CHAPTER IV

In 1944, while preparing her graduation thesis, Valya worked with a geological expedition of the West-Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences. Early in the autumn, when the expedition was winding up its work, she received the news of her mother's death. Grief-stricken, she set out at once for home, but she reached her native town too late for the funeral. The little house on Irkutskaya Street rose darkly above the naked acacia trees, its rain-splattered windows looking like tear-stained faces. Nina Sorokina, the neighbour's daughter, had moved temporarily into the silent, deserted rooms.

It was evening when Valya arrived. She went straight into the little bedroom and sat there for a couple of hours, too weary and heartsick even to remove her outdoor things. She asked no questions, and indeed there was no one but Nina who could tell her anything about the last days of her mother's life. But Nina shrank from bringing up the subject. At last she timidly looked in at the door.

"Valya, if there is anything. . . ."

"No, thank you. . . . I suppose I ought to wash. . . ."
Valya wanted to add: "and go to bed," but checked herself, horrified by her own callousness. She stared wildly

around her and only then did she realize with pitiless poignancy that never again would mother come to her in this room and sit down beside her.

... In the morning she tidied up the house and went to the Geological Administration to apply for work with the hope of obtaining a year's grace with her diploma project. Vakshin, the senior geologist, a grey-haired man of sixty, listened carefully to what she had to say and suggested that for the time being she might work on some of the materials brought in by the previous year's expeditions.

She had little heart for the work but it helped to take her out of herself a little, to ease the pain of her loss. One day, while working in a geological museum she met Professor Skitsky, a geologist engaged in a detailed study of the West-Siberian lowlands. Those who knew him well spoke of him as a "brainy chap" and a "glutton for work." A bachelor of 35, Skitsky instantly impressed everyone he met by his pleasant appearance and keen intelligence.

The days were chill and rainy with brief flurries of wet snow. Valya spent long hours at work. One evening Skitsky saw her home, and on one or two other occasions they happened to be going in the same direction. Once Valya invited him to come in and warm up. While she busied herself preparing supper, Skitsky paced up and down the room, rubbing his chilled face and talking about the latest news from the front he had just heard over the air.

After tea he lit a cigarette and told Valya of his extensive plans for research work the following summer, his eyes slightly narrowed and his stubby, powerful fingers stroking his chin as he talked. There were the mineral deposits of the Salairsk range, the polymetallic ores of

Gornaya, Shoria, and Chugunash manganese . . one of these days the geologists would have to explain why it was that the Kuznetsk basin still had to use Chiatura manganese ore.

"We geologists will have to supply the answer," Skitsky went on, his face unusually stern. He looked at Valya and said lowering his voice: "But forgive me, you must be bored by this geological tirade. . . ."

Valya involuntarily drew herself up. "Why should you think that, Vasili Panteleyevich?" she asked.

"You look so. . . ."

Valya slowly shook her head.

"I have suffered a terrible loss, Vasili Panteleyevich."

He looked down at her hands which had begun to tremble, then he raised his eyes, evidently with the intention of asking her something, but changed his mind. It was not until he was taking his leave that he asked her whether she was satisfied with her work and when she intended returning to the Institute.

"My work?" Valya hesitated. "It calms my nerves . . ." she hesitated again, then suddenly alert, said: "Why do you ask?"

Skitsky smiled wryly.

"I read your memorandum on the findings of the Tom-Usa expedition. There wasn't a single inspired idea in it, not a breath of feeling in the conclusions. . . Academic twaddle!" he wound up tersely.

When the professor had gone she sat for a long while with her cold fingers pressed to her throat, listening to her troubled thoughts. It was nearly a fortnight since Pavel had written. That had happened before, but never had she felt so disquieted. Could this silence go on forever? Pavel?

She rose sharply to her feet: How could she allow herself to mope like this.

"Academic twaddle!"

She swung round as though someone had just flung the words at her. Academic twaddle. What a disgrace!

The next morning she asked for her Tom-Usa memorandum back. She read it over carefully, studying every line. A collection of dry stilted phrases: "It must be assumed..." "Hardly justified is the claim..." "Some of the basic concepts are questionable."

She thought of the people working in the forests of the upper Tom, battling with the elements, fighting the midge, rejoicing in every minor discovery in which they saw promise of almost untold wealth latent in this new coal area. And then careless hands touched those bright dreams and the colours faded....

With a sort of fierce pleasure she tore up her memorandum and sat up for several nights rewriting it. Later on, when the chief of the expedition praised her for her bold conclusions and hailed a new ally in her, she was painfully embarrassed.

Skitsky was no doubt informed of all this but he never referred to the matter again.

They went to the theatre several times together. To her annoyance Valya discovered that it gave her pleasure to see this distinguished scientist grow more and more timid in his manner towards her, to watch the faint flush that mantled his swarthy cheeks when he talked to her. He courted her, but he was so awkward and boyish about it that she could neither take offence nor scold him for it. She felt at ease with him—at any rate she was not aware that his presence prevented her from thinking about Rogov. But unconsciously her thoughts turned more and

more to Skitsky; when she was with him the image of the distant Rogov tended to become a little blurred, and some of his characteristic traits to be effaced altogether. Nor did she notice that the professor's presence, his compelling personality and his fine intellect held an irresistible attraction for her. More and more often she caught herself thinking: "I must ask Vasili Panteleyevich's advice," or wondering whether Vasili Panteleyevich would approve of one or another decision she had made.

In January the Soviet Army swept up to the Oder. The weather was frosty. Valya's nerves were keyed up to breaking point. Her heart yearned to follow every letter she dispatched to Pavel. She worked at a feverish pace, day after day poring over geological maps, notes and prospectors' samples.

After that two weeks' silence the previous autumn Rogov had again begun to write more frequently, but who could guarantee that the delicate thread of postal communication might not snap at any moment? The brief war communiqués reported a swift drive westward over a thousand-kilometre front, fierce fighting, huge quantities of trophies and large numbers of prisoners.

"We spent last night on a Polish estate," Rogov wrote in one of his letters. "Since there was no room in any of the houses we decided to sleep in the hayloft. During the night, however, it was discovered that a whole squad of Hitlerite tommy-gunners had put up for the night right under us. There was a bit of a fuss and we lost some sleep."

His casual way of relating what happened caused a chill to creep over her

In the middle of February the letters stopped coming. One day Valya went to Vakshin and asked him to give her some more work:

"Anything will do," she said.

"You're handling three departments as it is, aren't you?" Vakshin asked moodily.

"I want more!" she insisted.

The elderly geologist fidgeted irritably on his chair, looked at the girl several times out of the corner of his eye, and finally pulled a folder out of a drawer and began leafing through its contents. Valya leaned over his shoulder.

"He's in Poland, isn't he?" he asked dropping his voice. "Doesn't write?"

She nodded. The bright sunlit window in front of her grew blurred and twisted.

"He hasn't written . . . for a whole month."

Vakshin laid a withered hand on her shoulder.

"My boy too . . . hasn't written. We must be brave, my dear. . . . If it's work you want, there's plenty and to spare."

She continued to write to Rogov regularly every other day, and just as regularly her letters came back with the inscription on the back: "Addressee not found."

Nina Sorokina raised in every now and then with the inevitable question: "Any news, Valya?" And she would add with a sigh: "I haven't heard anything for a week either. . . ."

In those silvery days when the snow began to melt, the tension became so great that Valya was almost afraid to breathe. She feared every idle moment. In addition to her main work she had undertaken to prepare data for two other departments. From morning until late at night

her colleagues saw her smooth fair head bent over the desk, or over a drawing board, or else in the geological museum over some ore samples.

...On that golden day in May she returned home feeling as weary as usual. With an accustomed gesture she turned the key in the lock, slowly opened the door and glanced down at the little mat on the threshold—for the hundredth time in vain. There was no letter. She looked at her watch—five minutes to six. Hastily she switched on the radio and sat down by the window, strained and tense.

Outwardly everything looked the same as it had a year or two years ago, yet deep in her heart she had been conscious of something tremendous maturing for a long time now, something that could not be accurately described in words. Her heart thrilled with the certainty that each passing hour brought victory nearer.

From her window she could not actually see the sun dropping lower and lower on the horizon on its way to distant lands, but she watched the pink light on the roofs of the neighbouring houses grow fainter and more delicate until it finally rose and floated up into space.

The call signals issuing from the loudspeaker broke off. There was a brief pause and then the familiar voice boomed in the twilight hush.

“This is Moscow calling!”

Valya crushed her kerchief against her breast. Yes, everything was going as it should. Dresden had been taken. “Having reached the Elbe, our troops. . .” How many more rivers were there in Germany?

With an impulsive gesture she threw open the window. The earth was still bare of flowers or grass, but the air was full of soft warm scents that stirred the soul.

The door opened and Nina Sorokina came in, sat down, quietly beside her, clasped her knees with her hands and dropped her eyes to hide her reddened eyelids.

"I'm the unhappiest girl in the world, Valya. . . . Think of it, a whole week and not a word. . . ."

The hands on her knees trembled.

Presently Valya switched on the light and Nina unfolded the two letters she had last received and read them aloud, savouring every word. On the little map they traced the long and weary road the soldier travelled and agreed that he really could not be blamed if he had not had time to write recently. There was silence for a while.

"And what about you?" Nina looked timidly up into Valya's eyes. "Eh, Valya?"

She answered softly, her head drawn into her shoulders.

"I'm terribly tired. . . ."

"Still waiting?"

She hesitated a moment, then straightened up and lifted her head defiantly.

"How could I bear to live otherwise?" she said, and tore the plug of the radio out of its socket.

Nina was the first to break the intolerable silence that ensued.

"Forgive me, Val'ya," she said in a hurried whisper. "I'm such a tactless creature. . . . I'd better be going. Sometimes they bring letters in the evenings too."

Valya plugged in the radio. Apart from a vague rustling and whispering all was silent. Yet this whispering silence seemed charged with terrific tension.

It was useless to go to bed; on that night, as on nearly all the other nights following the fall of Berlin, sleep was out of the question. She worked up and down the room

between the window and the door for a long time, going over in her mind the words of a letter long since received.

"What a pity I missed seeing you. When the train turned west from Yurga and you were left in the East, in Tomsk, something seemed to snap inside me. Would I ever see you again? But soon there was no time to think of anything. Battle after battle, my comrades dying, the sight of our native soil lacerated and bleeding. . . . I felt myself growing hard. It seemed to me then that I rarely thought of you, but now I know that you were always by my side."

And quite recently he had written:

"It's only 68 kilometres to Berlin. The Oder is a murky, alien river. We are very busy these days. I'm wondering what dress you are wearing as you read this. . . ."

Could it really be that the letter was written in February? How time flies. . . .

Sleep, or the oblivion of sheer exhaustion must have overwhelmed her, for a gentle tap at the door made her start.

The little old postman came in and handed her a folded telegram. Fearing lest she give way to a flood of irrepressible tears she took it with stiff fingers and laid it on the edge of the table unopened. The old postman fumbled interminably in his bag searching for the receipt. At last he went.

She thought she would not have the strength to reach out for the telegram. But her weakness lasted only for a second. Holding her breath, she unfolded the message and read: "Had a bad case of concussion. All right now. Cheer up. Pavel."

She dimly remembered going over to the window and standing there for a long time with her cheek pressed to

the glass. She sat down in a daze, feeling the blood pounding madly in her hands hanging limply at her sides. The sky over the roof of the next house was already blue. She laid her head on the window sill and fell asleep, her face upturned to the dawn.

The sun warmed her eyelids. A square patch of golden sunshine lay slantwise on the coloured mat. A ray of rainbow-coloured light reflected from the mirror played on the uncreased pillow. She still held the telegram clutched tightly in her hand. How sweet that early awakening was!

Close by, just outside the window, she saw the radiant face of Nina wet with tears.

"Valya, you silly goose! Wake up! The war is over! We've been waiting for this for four years and now it's all finished overnight. . . . Oh, my poor heart. . . . You can't imagine what it's doing to me, Valya. And you ought to see what's happening in the street! Look, even the earth is singing!"

What a host of people there were in the streets on that blue sunny morning! What gay singing! On the wall opposite the house two small boys were scrawling the glad tidings in huge letters: "Victory!"

. . . Valya waited all through May. Immediately after Victory Day Skitsky came to her with a bouquet of fresh snowdrops which he laid on the table with a trusting smile.

"Vasili Panteleyevich, I'm so, so happy!" Valya confessed.

"I am happy for you, Valentina Sergeyevna," Skitsky said and gently pressed her hand.

Rogov arrived unexpectedly the very day Skitsky was due to leave by plane for the Kuzbas.

CHAPTER V

Which of the memories of those spring days were most vivid? Perhaps the old fort in Kuznetsk, the dazzling, burnished steel glint of the expanse of water where the river forked, the wind, the sun that was so young and so grudging of its warmth, the blue mountains in the distance, and again the wind, the wind. . . . And that fathomless joy in his beloved's eyes?

Yes, but he had been swept by this feeling before, when for the first time after the long separation he had stepped down on to the platform of the Novosibirsk railway station.

The train pulled in early in the morning. Rogov hurried out on to the spacious square in front of the station and paused in wonder: well, well, his countrymen had done things in grand style here! The large station building, shot through with early morning sunshine, seemed to be floating in a bluish shimmering haze.

But Rogov had no patience to stand and stare. He was irresistibly drawn to the quiet little side streets, still unpaved, with the acacia and bird cherry trees in the front gardens and the rows of tall old poplars. He glanced at the plate with the name of the street: "Irkutskaya." A tremor of gladness stirred within him. To the left, through the green of the garden, he saw two small windows like pools in a forest glade. He tugged at his tunic, and was already striding toward the wicket gate, when he noticed two people walking in front of him. A man of medium height, arm in arm with a tall girl.

His heart leapt violently and his eyes seemed to be on fire. Breathlessly, as if he had just climbed a hill, he gasped:

"Valya!"

The girl turned and came quickly towards him, and her eyes filled with tears. Those tears and the way her hands clutched spasmodically at Rogov's neck betokened such joy that years of anguished yearning were wiped out in one instant.

"Valya darling," Rogov murmured, kissing her warm, tear-stained face and now gazing into her large, shining eyes.

At last she began to speak, breathless with happiness.

"Pavel . . . Pavel, aren't you weeping with happiness, too? You . . . you look quite different. You smell of the wind and the sun Oh Pavel!" Then she turned swiftly to her forgotten companion and said in a low voice: "You see, professor, how lucky I am. . . . Oh, so lucky! This is my Pavel!"

A day later they left for Kuzbas. It was Rogov who made the decision. Valya had attempted to dissuade him.

"No, no," he said with good-natured obstinacy. "We can't sit here in these tiny rooms! Let's get out into the wide open spaces and feel the wind in our faces!"

Tiny rooms! Valya had examined her small flat in some surprise. To her these small rooms meant home, she had always looked forward eagerly to coming back to them, and she felt rather hurt by the hint of condescension in Rogov's tone. After all, it was in these rooms that she had waited four long years for him, it was here that happiness had come to them both.

. . . They visited the fort in Staro-Kuznetsk. They climbed the hoary stone wall when the sun was at its noontide zenith. Down below spread the old town—thousands of small wooden houses wedged between the banks

of the Tom and the hill on which the fort stood. Beyond the river and over to the right ran the smooth ribbon of the highway and a row of tramcar posts. The huge brick contours of Stalinsk were visible five kilometres away. Smoke came from the giant factory chimneys. Farther up the Tom, beyond Staro-Kuznetsk, they could see the outlines of two other plants whose rectangular buildings looked from afar like ships launched on a distant voyage. The ancient fort wall of grey sandstone towered over the spreading expanse of the river.

The spring sun stood high in the blue heavens. The grass rustled. Their bodies felt curiously light; it seemed that they had only to spread out their arms to soar up into the air like birds.

They stood for a long while side by side.

Presently Rogov climbed on to the edge of the parapet and stood there with his hands thrust into his pockets. The wind swept back his dark hair and light shadows danced before his eyes.

"Wonderful!" he said straightening his shoulders as if matching his strength with that of the green hilly expanses. "Wonderful!" he repeated slowly, and then frowned. "Just the same, I must say it's high time they built a bridge over the Tom. And imagine, Valya, I only learned today that the office of the Kuznetsk trust is still located in town while the pits are away out there—see where those waste dumps are? That's Baidayevka, it's nine kilometres from here, and beyond that is Abashevo and Zyryanovka. How can they supervise the work from such a distance? By telephone?"

He jumped down to where Valya stood.

"Know what," he said, "let's take a trip up the Tom! I'll hire a motorboat today."

...They sailed up the Tomi for four days. They spent one day on shore at a point not far from the mouth of the Mras-su. In the morning Rogov went for a swim in the icy spring water. He swam out with brisk strokes to the middle of the river and shouted back to Valya in a ringing, boyish voice:

"Hey, there, Valya! Afraid to take the plunge? Come on in!"

But she only shivered at the idea and smiled as she watched him cut his way through the blue and silver water.

In the afternoon they fished, sunbathed and talked about a thousand and one things. He sang, hopelessly out of tune, and kept begging her: "Come on, girl, help me, I've forgotten all the words."

In the evening they built a bonfire and sat by it eating the fish Rogov had cooked. They both praised it highly although it was clearly oversalted. After supper they sat staring into the dying embers, watching the little golden points of light flickering within them.

It was then that Valya asked for the first time:

"Aren't you tired, after all those years at the front? Don't you long for a little peace and quiet?"

"Tired?" Rogov echoed in surprise. "No, my dear, I plead not guilty on that count."

She made an imperceptible movement away from him and went on as if changing the subject:

"Pavel, you really ought to think about taking a graduate course. I would strongly advise you to. After all, creative scientific work opens such tremendous vistas. . . . Think it over, Pavel. And besides, we'd be together. I do wish you would. I can't . . . I can't be without you any more. . . ."

Rogov felt her warm breath on his face, he drew her close and looked into the fathomless depths of her eyes where the golden shadows from the dying embers smouldered.

"My darling girl! But we are together, aren't we! And we have our whole long lives before us!"

He sprang up and threw a handful of dry twigs into the fire and looked up to watch the sparks sweep like a fiery tornado into the black sky.

"Just wait, Valya," he said after a reflective pause "We'll build mines here one day, on this very spot And what mines! The wonderful Tom-Usa basin is right here Shut your eyes and try to imagine what this place will look like . . . No forests, the swamps drained, a myriad of lights and the din and roar of huge construction, gardens, houses And . . . now this is a secret—our children, yours and mine, will run to school here!"

Valya looked down, her dark eyelashes trembling There was a new stubbornness and persistence about Rogov. More than once during these past few days she had broached the subject of graduate work and how it would help them to be together, how at last they could build their future side by side.

"To build the future means to fight for it," Rogov had said the first time the question came up "It means working, studying . . . As for the cosy little rooms, the soft couches and the flowerpots on the windows—all those things will come in time " He had broken off and laughed "That sort of thing tends to make a man flabby and decrepit before his time "

The second time she mentioned it, he said in surprise "But, Valya, surely you don't believe that if we live and work apart—temporarily of course—we shall belong to

each other any the less? You don't think that, really, do you? Then why do you look so worried?"

And now again he had said the wrong thing, and perhaps that explained the feeling of something akin to resentment that swept over her. Once more she found herself thinking of Skitsky, the attentive, considerate, uncomplicated Skitsky she had known throughout the past difficult year.

For the night they made themselves a tiny shelter of pine branches. As he tucked her in, Pavel asked Valya:

"Are you sure you will be warm? And you aren't afraid?"

A few minutes later when he had lain down in his corner she said softly:

"Pavel, do you love me?"

"Valya darling!" Pavel rose on his elbow. "If you only knew how much!"

"I want to hear you say it again. . . ."

Through the pine branches they could see a warm, blue star twinkle directly overhead, and from somewhere quite near came the call of a night bird. The night was dark and dense, and the earth seemed boundless and tender.

. . . Rogov could not stay in one place for more than a day at a time. "I want to see what my countrymen have been doing in my absence," he kept saying. "I want to learn how to live again." Or, pressing Valya's hand, he would interrupt himself to exclaim: "Look how young and handsome the land is getting, look at all those new buildings going up! It makes your hands itch to get to work!"

In Tashtagol, Gornaya Shoria, they went to the mine straight from the railway station. Before she knew what was happening, Valya found herself being introduced to

a good dozen miners. Their inspection of the opencut workings was interrupted by the signal for blasting. While the explosions thundered they took shelter under a shed. As she rested, Valya gazed down at the Kondoma twisting snakily down below, while Rogov launched into a heated argument with an engineer who had taken cover with them.

"Excuse me, excuse me now, you're talking sheer nonsense!" he said politely, interrupting the other. "The efficiency of a coal-cutting machine working in a solid seam equals . " He snatched his notebook from his pocket, thumbed quickly through it and underlining something showed it to the engineer: "You see?"

Valya laughed to herself as she recalled how he had pounced on one of their travelling companions in the train in like manner bombarding him with questions and arguments. Rogov had been so completely oblivious to his surroundings that when she had intervened to ask him something, he had turned to her absently with a polite "excuse me," and resumed the conversation.

All this endeared Rogov to her, yet at the same time she could not help wondering whether she would have the strength to keep in step with this man all her life. Suppose she were to fall behind? She felt herself capable of achieving as much in life as Pavel; the difference lay in the pace, the inner rhythm.

In their brief hours of relaxation he was always tender and thoughtful. He would gaze at her avidly, studying her every feature, and she would bend her head, close her eyes and beg him: "Don't look at me like that! Please!"

The road from Tashtagol to the gold mining settlement of Spassk wound steeply up the mountainside. They

climbed steadily until the valley of the Kondoma was left far down below and the blue peak of Sheregesh mountain rose before them in the east. Suddenly Valya plumped down, laughing, on the roadside and chewing the sticky, curly leaf of a wild raspberry, said through her laughter:

"I'm tired, Pavel, honestly I am. Why on earth must you be always on the run? You don't give me time to catch my breath. You'll see, one day I'll drop down somewhere and you'll be to blame."

"But you're a geologist, an explorer," Rogov replied, then added after a pause: "You frighten me, Valya. Sometimes it seems to me that you and I are very different at bottom. I am mistaken? Then tell me this, are you stirred by the same things that stir me?"

"Pavell!" Valya cried, and hesitated for a moment. Then with a defiant little toss of her head she went on. "Of course I am, Pavel, only I cannot tear along the way you do, and I do hate when you allow yourself to be completely carried away by all sorts of unimportant things and forget my very existence."

"Unimportant?" Rogov echoed absently.

A week later, when they had reached Stalinsk, they happened to return to the subject, but both avoided discussing it and the matter was put off until "some other time."

They spent one of their last evenings at the home of Ivan Sergeyevich Dombitsky, a metallurgical engineer. A veteran of the Kuznetsk basin and fervent follower of Kurako, the famous blast furnace Stakhanovite, Dombitsky was one of those who never missed an opportunity to recall the memorable days when the huge plant and the lovely town of Kuznetsk that grew up around it came into being in a wilderness of marshes and wastelands.

Dombitsky greeted Valya and Pavel with some poetry recited with much feeling:

I know
the land
will prosper,
I know
great towns
will rise,
For I know
what sort
of people,
The Soviets
comprise.

"When I was in Magnitogorsk some time ago," he added with a smile, "the local old-timers insisted that Mayakovsky had their city in mind when he wrote that verse. How do you like that for conceit? The fact is the verse was written about the Kuznetsk development and its people. Don't you think so?"

Rogov shrugged his shoulders.

"No doubt. But I believe the Magnitogorsk people are right too."

"Indeed?" said Dombitsky with a wry smile.

It was a gay and pleasant company that assembled in Dombitsky's home that evening. The other guests were two actors from the city theatre, Professor Skitsky, the scientist from Novosibirsk who had the physique of a lumberjack and keen merry eyes under a wide forehead, and two students of a teacher's college, both relatives of Dombitsky. One of the students—a fair-haired girl in a dark dress—sang a few songs with much feeling, and was so shy and nervous that the applause was doubly generous.

Professor Skitsky talked about his latest expedition to the Tom-Usa coal deposits. Rogov noticed that Valya unconsciously moved closer to the geologist, a flush of excitement mounting to her cheeks. He saw how eagerly she plied the speaker with questions about his prospecting, clearly oblivious to all else.

Rogov moved over to the window and endeavoured once more to thrash things out for himself. What was bothering him, and what actually did he want? That Valya should be with him? Yes, that was a desire nothing could make him relinquish. But at the present time this was impossible. What about later on?

As if divining his state of mind, Valya came over and leaned her elbows on the wide marble window sill, evidently wishing to say something but unable to find the right words.

Down below, the narrow street disappeared into the blue dusk. To the left, on the other side of the square, stood the cubic contours of a seven-storey apartment house, which because of the pale light that shone in every window seemed to be built solidly of shining glass. Smiling at her thoughts, Valya looked up into Rogov's face.

"Feeling sad, Pavlik?"

"Not exactly," he shook his head.

"Tell me the truth."

"Very well. I shall tell you the truth. Yes, I do feel a little sad. After some of the things you have said I don't know how it is going to be."

"What do you mean?"

His shoulders twitched with impatience.

"I mean our life together! You are forever being tortured by doubts. Why don't you speak of them frankly?"

The sharpness of his tone did not appear to surprise her.

"But, Pavel," she said quietly, "is there really anything else to be said? I know by now that nothing can tear you away from the Kuzbas, from your work. I believe that you love me. These few weeks together have convinced me of that. But, you see, it is myself I doubt, my own strength. Don't you understand? Give me time to work this thing out for myself. If I find I cannot do it alone, I shall ask you to help me." She broke off and glanced over at Skitsky.

For a moment Rogov's lips stiffened into a tight line, and he bowed his head.

"All right, darling, we have all our life before us. . . . Put your hand here, closer to my heart . . . Can't you hear life throbbing there?"

Valya left for Novosibirsk the following morning. She and Rogov stood in the narrow corridor of the carriage waiting for the train to leave. They wanted to say something worth remembering to each other in parting, for who knew how long it would be before they would meet again? But the right words would not come.

The train pulled out, and as the wheels uttered their first rat-tat under the carriage, Valya dropped wearily onto the seat. These weeks with Rogov had left her strangely disquieted. What had she looked forward to throughout those interminable years? Peace, unruffled love? But did such love really exist?

Blue eyes, blue eyes,
How I love you, blue eyes. . .

She remembered the little song her mother used to sing about a pair of eyes that expressed nothing but love. And

until these last few days spent with Pavel she had always for some reason associated him with that old song. Now, however, she had discovered that his eyes were not at all blue any more, and certainly not tranquil and placid. As a matter of fact, she was not at all sure that they ever had been. Was that not an illusion born of the long evenings of loneliness?

CHAPTER VI

When Rogov entered the pit manager's office he guessed at once from the way Drobot stopped talking and reached into a folder that the men in the room had been discussing him.

"We've got a complaint against you here," Drobot said in a tone of studied nonchalance, for some reason casting a questioning look at Filenkov and Starodubtsev. "Some of the miners say you've been making illegal pay deductions."

"Which miners?" Rogov dropped wearily into a chair.

"You needn't worry, though," Drobot hastened to add. "I've looked into it and I see it can be straightened out without difficulty."

"If there's a complaint," Rogov said, "it must be investigated and the guilty parties called to order. That's the procedure, isn't it?"

Drobot lowered his eyes.

"A man needs the patience of an ox to talk with you," he said with a wry smile. "You're the guilty party. The men are complaining that district engineer Rogov has been rejecting their work right and left. . . . As manager I cannot overlook this sort of thing. What will it look like when this gets to the City Party Committee?"

Rogov's interest was roused.

"Who are the plaintiffs?"

"What's the difference?" Drobot evaded the question "The important thing is that the complaint is justified. . . ."

"How can you stand up for men who turn out sub-standard output? They turned out thirty per cent rock in a shift."

"Which face was it?"

"Number Twenty-Eight."

"What do you think is the reason?"

"Sheer carelessness."

"Just a moment!" Drobot interrupted him and rising from his chair stamped irritably back and forth behind his desk. "I'll tell you the reason. It's because you're still experimenting in No. 28 in spite of the unreliable roof. You still haven't worked out the gobbing properly, or the system of propping either."

Rogov slowly shook his head.

"I have, Pyotr Mikhailovich. I did it a week ago. I put it all on paper and now I'm waiting for the chief engineer's signature."

"I signed it," Filenkov put in hastily. "And passed it on to the chief."

Drobot knitted his brows as if searching his memory.

"Nobody's going to deprive you of the right to think about improvements," he said after a moment's pause. "But I tell you again that current production's our chief concern. And don't forget it! Otherwise we'll have everybody going in for inventions while I alone have to be responsible for output. Inventors indeed!"

Yes, Rogov thought, there isn't much about mining that Drobot doesn't know. But that is as far as it goes.

Behind the pit chief's outward alertness and loud bossy manner Rogov sensed backwaters of conservatism that defied any attempt to stir them. But the days and months were flying, and one could not go on marking time. True, Drobot was coping with all the basic current work. You had only to hear him shouting orders into the telephone to see that he knew his mine inside out. When he declared that he could trace the pedigree of every pillar in the new working, or that the roof in the upper part of the seam was so solid you could plant potatoes there and calmly wait for the harvest, you could be sure he knew what he was talking about. But what of it?

"What of it?" Rogov sat up at his own question. "That's the crux of the matter! That's how he manages to keep his job and keep the mine going—or rather, stagnating."

Yet all this was mere theorizing, as Drobot himself would have said. What was wanted now was an immediate solution.

Only the night before Rogov had sat over the mine surveyor's data, carefully analyzing the situation as regards baring operations. He had tried to visualize the condition of the pit in three or four months' time, and the picture was nothing short of alarming. If they were to go on baring the seams at the present pace the pit's reserves would not hold out for more than six months at the very best. And then what?

Barely able to wait till morning, he had gone straight to the Party Bureau, only to learn that the Party organizer had gone to the City Committee and was unlikely to be back for some time; he was preparing to leave the mine and take a course of study, and a new man was expected to take his place.

Yet something had to be done without delay. After serious thought he called over Dubintsev and told him to choose two good crews for high-speed drift driving.

"We've tried it before." The technician sounded sceptical.

"I'm not asking you to *try* anything," Rogov spoke sharply and gave the other a cold look. "Is the assignment clear?"

"Clear enough!" Dubintsev replied promptly and hurried off to carry out his orders.

An hour later the lists of names had been drawn up, but Kharlamov, the assistant chief engineer, would not endorse them.

"You're stripping the other sections of men, my dear Pavel Gordeyevich!" he said.

"I am merely concentrating the main forces at the point of the main drive," Rogov protested.

"Look here, man," Kharlamov's brow creased. "Don't try to trip me up with your high-sounding lingo, better consider the cold facts. You'd have two drifts hitting a rate of two hundred metres a month while the others crawled along at a snail's pace."

However, Rogov adduced such weighty arguments and pressed his point so strongly that Kharlamov finally gave in.

"All right, I'll agree," he said, throwing up his hands. "With your persistence you could take cities by storm. Here's the signature. You have my blessing. And now go to the powers that be."

... Catching Drobot's questioning look during a break in the conversation, Rogov laid the lists of the tunnelling crews before the mine chief. The latter gave them a quick glance and pushed them over toward Filenkov.

"Glance over this, it's up your alley."

"Well, yes..." the chief engineer thought the matter over, heaving a sigh. "I think this is quite timely. A bit risky perhaps."

"Risky, you say?" Drobot said. "Hm... You know what, we'll do it, but we'll keep it to ourselves. So's not to look foolish if nothing comes of it."

"No!" Rogov almost shouted. "That won't do! In my opinion it must be made as widely known as possible—let the tunnelling crews feel what an important job they're doing. As for the risk... Well, there's an element of risk in anything new. Although in the present case it's practically excluded. Incidentally, to reduce the risk I would ask you to approve a schedule for the workings and this draft of an order for transport."

"Again transport?" Starodubtsev leaned over the desk. "Can't you leave me in peace, Pavel!"

Rogov laughed dryly.

"What has your peace got to do with it? I'm talking about getting enough empties for the high-speed drifts."

"Easy, comrades," Drobot interrupted him. "I'll approve of one crew and the schedule for it. As a matter of fact, it's a good thing to get this started: yesterday the trust got instructions from the coal field head office to begin introducing high-speed methods at the face. By the time the instructions reach us we'll have the thing going." He snapped his fingers, looking pleased, but then his features clouded over. "But I want to ask you, Pavel Gordeyevich, to be sensible and realize when to stop! And as far as publicity is concerned, I won't have any hullabaloo, no publicity around this business. The thing is still in its initial stage and we can't afford to stake the

honour of the whole collective on it. You can go to the Party Bureau or anywhere else you like, but I won't have it."

Filenkov, who had said nothing during this exchange, now spoke up.

"It'll probably be better the way Pyotr Mikhailovich wants it. . . . If we succeed the whole mine'll learn about it, and the trust, and the City Committee too. . . ." Filenkov heaved another sigh and choosing his words with some difficulty, wound up: "It is bound, so to say, to have an important political effect. . . . It'll make an impression."

At this Semyon Starodubtsev snorted and drew up his chair closer to the desk.

"And what an impression," he sneered. "The trust will promptly add a few thousand tons to the plan. Things'll begin moving all right. . . . Only I don't know whether this is the proper time."

"Hear that?" Drobot looked at Rogov as if he had found him guilty of some unpardonable blunder. "So you know the condition: no hullabaloo."

Rogov rose with a heavy heart. He had no wish to continue a conversation which had begun to sound too much like bargaining. Taking the list of the crew from Filenkov, he walked toward the door.

"Pavel Gordeyevich," Drobot called after him, "there's something else. Almost slipped my mind. Yesterday they decided in the trust to give you Section Seven as well. So you'd better take it over and get busy."

"The north side?" Rogov, taken aback by the information, barely refrained from refusing point-blank. Today was the seventeenth of the month, and the seventh section was the most backward of the lot, the district would again

fail to fulfil the month's plan. It looked as if a deliberate attempt was being made to leave him no time for carrying out his ideas.

"What's the difference, north or south?" Drobot replied in a conciliatory tone. "Same seam, isn't it? By the way, don't forget there's a meeting of Stakhanovites at six tomorrow. We're getting the challenge banner!"

Rogov was searching for Dubintsev. He looked in the numerous rooms of the office and then went through the shower house. In the dispatching room the sun shone down through the top windows on the concrete floor in slanting beams and in each beam swirled myriads of golden particles of dust. The afternoon shift was about to go down and all around there was an incessant hum of voices punctuated by low laughter and snatches of conversation; more than ever before these hundreds of miners reminded Rogov of one large industrious family.

He could not find Dubintsev. He was about to go to the stockroom to continue the search when he heard his name called. Turning around, he saw Voshchin among a group of workers. The old miner extended his hand in greeting.

"I've heard about the high-speed drift idea," Voshchin said. "If there's anything for me you might keep me in mind."

"I've got a good memory for that sort of thing," Rogov assured him. "I've put you down first on the list. More than that, you'll have to take charge of the crew, Afanasi Petrovich."

"Can be done, if need be," Voshchin replied.

"I am very anxious to have the thing go well," Rogov

said with a confiding smile as he clasped the miner's powerful, almost square hand.

The latter shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Pavel Gordeyevich," he began, hesitantly. "My son's coming back from the army—he was at the front, you know—and my daughter's back too. You might drop in some evening for a chat."

Rogov promised to come.

CHAPTER VII

The following morning Rogov lost no time in taking over the new section. He was anxious to find out at once how things stood there.

The superintendent of Section Seven turned out to be a middle-aged man with an unruly mop of hair and small features besprinkled with greenish freckles.

"Ocheredko's the name," he introduced himself and plunged at once into a formal report: "The output curve for the section, comrade engineer. . . ."

"Let's have it straight—without curves," Rogov interrupted.

Ocheredko faltered, then went on to give a jumbled account of the state of affairs, managing to get in a word about the output curve which, it appeared, "had a tendency" to fall.

Rogov did not like the report, though it was nothing if not detailed. Ocheredko could not say anything about the reserve of coal ready for extraction; on the other hand about the new workers he had been getting from trade school he had a great deal to say.

"They're a joke, comrade district engineer," he said, his lips twisting with annoyance "Labour reserves they're

called. If you ask me they should have been left in the reserve. Greenhorns, every man jack of them! The way they attack a single pillar like a swarm of ants without getting anything done is enough to make you sick! We didn't work like that during the war, let me tell you!"

"You're not going to have a quiet time of it now either," Rogov muttered through clenched teeth. "Don't bother showing me around, I'll look over the section myself."

The workings pleased Rogov no more than had the superintendent's report. In a lower parallel heading he found a group of miners sitting around. One of them flashed his lamp at the engineer's face and said:

"Some job this! Sit around and yawn till your jaws ache. No timber."

Thinking that he had not been recognized, Rogov sat down some distance from the men. However, one of them turned to him with a sudden movement.

"When is this sort of thing going to stop in this section?" the miner said "Maybe you can tell us. Everybody else works like he's supposed to, but with us there isn't a day without some hitch or other: either it's no props or not enough trams."

It turned out that there were two crews in the section. One of them, the men Rogov was talking to, consisted of old experienced miners, and the other was made up of youngsters fresh from vocational school. The old-timers had good reason to complain, for they constantly had to "clean up after the labour reserves," as Ocheredko had put it.

Rogov went to the face. The coal-cutting machine was standing idle while the operator was mending his canvas glove in the dim light of his lamp

"The cable needs changing but the mechanic's disappeared into thin air," the man casually remarked with a quick glance at the engineer.

"What's to prevent you from tackling it yourself?"

"Nothing, except that they wouldn't issue me the cable at the stockroom."

Rogov went down a manhole. He jumped off the bottom rung of a rickety ladder and felt his feet sink into the mud below. Water and filth covered the rails, and the gallery as a whole looked like a long narrow stretch of bog. The ventilator emitted a thin whine, drawing an invisible thread of air through the tunnel, a lamp flickered nearby revealing a miner who had dozed off, leaning against a prop.

"There's nothing to do anyway?" he bristled when Rogov reprimanded him. "The empties are where they should be and there's no coal in the chute."

"Remember," Rogov said quietly but firmly, "that a hundred metres both sides of this gallery is your responsibility. I'm coming back at the end of the shift and if I find the place in this mucky condition I'll call you a loafer . . . in the presence of witnesses too. Understand?"

Rogov came up to the surface with a heavy heart. It was already dark, and through the gloom he saw a row of glowing cigarette ends on the metal viaduct near the pithead.

"That's enough about girls! I'm sick of that talk," a bass voice said. "Let's have a song, eh fellows?"

Climbing up on the viaduct, Rogov went over to the group sitting there.

"Anyone got a smoke?"

"Sure, Comrade Rogov. Take a seat," said the one who had suggested a song.

"How do you know who I am?" Rogov asked as he took a cigarette.

"After the bit about you in today's paper the whole pit knows you," the young man grinned.

"In the paper?"

"Yes. Haven't you seen it? They gave you a proper dressing down and even stuck in a verse at the bottom."

"I'll have to read it as soon as I find the time," Rogov said, sitting down on a step.

"You certainly must, if you haven't so far," someone added with a chuckle.

For a minute or two an awkward silence reigned. Then one of the young men, evidently the most talkative of the lot, got up impatiently.

"I'm fed up hanging about here. Think I'll look in at the club. . . ."

"Now listen here. . ." Rogov took him quietly by the arm and pulled him down. "You don't have to be fed up, you know."

"I didn't mean anything," the young man stammered.

"Neither did I. You're from the seventh section, aren't you? Cherepanov's crew? And you're Cherepanov, right?"

"That's us . . ." came a voice from a higher step followed by a sorrowful sigh "Now we'll be getting it."

"Getting what?"

"Told off. Ocheredko lays into us morning and night."

"Don't like it, eh?" Rogov smiled.

"Did you like it when they hauled you over the coals in the paper," the young man next to him said with a short laugh.

Rogov remembered that he had an unopened pack of cigarettes in his pocket, produced it, broke the seal and passed it around.

He had intended to have a frank talk with the young miners, ask them point-blank whether they really wanted to work, what had prompted them to go into mining, and find out what help they needed. He was wondering where to begin when suddenly, for no apparent reason, it seemed to him that he was with a group of young soldiers somewhere near the firing lines. How many encounters like this had there been during the war years, and how little had been said on such occasions. . . What need for long speeches had men who had come to defend their native soil? Yet time and again words pregnant with the great truth welled up of themselves, filling those who heard them now with wrath toward the enemies, now with tender filial love for their native land. But that was at the front, in unaccustomed surroundings, far from home, what was there that he could say specially for these young miners? How could he say it so that they would see for themselves what a really great task life had set them? Rogov was still turning these thoughts over in his mind, but the words were already surging up, seeking an outlet.

"It's a wonderful life you lads are launching on," he heard himself say reflectively. He paused for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders impatiently and repeated in a loud voice: "A glorious life! D'you realize that, miners? And here you are beginning it haphazardly, stumbling and faltering, because you don't realize how much each of you has in him. I wish you lads knew Stepan Danilov. He served in my company on the Bryansk front—he had a tough time of it."

Rogov went on slowly, pausing from time to time to take a deep pull on his cigarette, and with each pull the glowing tip faintly illumined his firm mouth, his rather short nose and bulging forehead. The earth was in repose.

all around, as if listening to his unhurried narrative, the stars seemed to have come down closer to earth, and the mine nearby was sighing hoarsely. . . . For the young men Rogov's words evoked scenes from the distant frontlines.

. . . The autumn rain lashed at the aspens thinned out and mutilated by gunfire, Rogov continued. The clay walls of the trenches kept caving in, and mud oozed in under the dugout door. Inside the dark, damp shelter soldiers were sitting or lying on earthen bunks. Suddenly the silence was broken by a knock on the door.

In response to the sergeant-major's gruff "Come in," the door opened and a short, stocky soldier stepped in. Drawing himself up, the newcomer reported: "Red Army man Danilov. Discharged from hospital. Military specialty—scout and sniper. Just arrived with a replacement company."

Pausing to catch his breath, he grinned and said: "You should have seen the bombing I just got."

"Must have been Goering himself," somebody teased. "And here we were wondering why it was so quiet around here."

"That's right, Adolf must have loosed his whole army against this sniper!" another added.

"Supposing you give us the story straight," said the sergeant-major. "That's what I'm trying to do," retorted the newcomer. "You see, it was like this: I hitched up with a field kitchen coming this way—I like field kitchens, they're warm, and then there's always something to eat. The cook was telling me tall stories—how he'd captured a Hungarian general singlehanded armed with nothing but a soup ladle—when the planes came over. The chef took to the bushes on all fours. I was looking around for a hole to duck into myself, but I hated the idea of leaving

a good kitchen standing around like that. So I grabbed the reins and whipped up the horses and off we galloped down the field. Maybe it was the extra draft or something, but the fact is that the firewood got kindled and the chimney began smoking like a steamboat. In the meantime one of the planes got on my tail and I had a tough time shaking him off. . . . But didn't I get it from him though! 'I'll report this to the sergeant-major himself,' he says " "Who? The German?" someone chimed in. "The cook, of course, after the German had gone. 'Don't you know you've got to seal the cauldron hermetically before you engage the enemy,' he says. 'Half the soup's gone, you blockhead!'"

"He's a bit on the tough side, our cook is," said the sergeant-major, "but if there really isn't enough soup to go around, the two of you are in for some extra fatigue."

Everybody in the dugout roared. Then each of the men moved up to make room for the little chap and several tobacco pouches were extended to him. The sergeant-major, however, got in first and seated the newcomer beside him.

Half an hour later the company accordion was in Danilov's hands and he had played his way into the soldiers' hearts with tunes that carried them back home again. In a month he had accounted for eleven fascists; in three months, he killed seventy-six, and won two decorations. His fame spread all along the front, and the general himself invited him over and presented him with a rifle with his name engraved on it. He had scores of other snipers competing with him.

Just about this time a girl sniper named Tonya Lipilina who was serving with the neighbouring battalion had also made a name for herself. But for some unknown reason Danilov who was always so good-natured and friendly with everybody completely ignored her. They ran into each

other frequently and their positions were on neighbouring sectors, but there seemed to be no love lost between them, which was not quite natural for two people who protected each other's flanks.

"That slip of a girl? What can she do?" Danilov would say disdainfully whenever Lipilina was mentioned.

Which wasn't at all fair because Tonya was nearly as good a sniper as Danilov.

Just before the spring offensive began, Danilov threw the fascists into a frenzy by picking off a brass hat from Hitler's High Command who was making a tour of the forward fortifications. The fascists showered our trenches with leaflets announcing that in no more than five days' time the Russian sniper Daniloff would be put out of the running by that outstanding crack shot of the Wehrmacht, SS Major Hans von Ulpricht.

"Let 'em rave," Danilov said with a broad grin when he was shown one of these leaflets. Before going out to his post, however, he casually suggested to the company commander that the snipers on the neighbouring sectors should be told to keep their eyes open.

Two days passed. Then the enemy sniper made his presence felt by a series of bold strikes. Kotov, the company's jolly cook who had arrived with Danilov at the forward positions, was killed. Sergeant Neupokoyev was wounded and had to be replaced by the tubby Chistyakov. Almost within the hour three men were sent to the field hospital from the next company. Danilov's face darkened. In the evening the news came that the German sniper had wounded the regimental commander's adjutant. The accordion gave a deep growl as Danilov dropped it. For about ten minutes he sat motionless with eyes downcast and hands clasped between his knees.

Knowing his uneven temper, his comrades kept quiet for a while, then talked about everything but what was on their minds. Only Guryev, a middle-aged man from the Urals, could not help speaking up. "We stirred up the enemy all right, but to pick him off is another matter," he remarked.

Five minutes later Danilov went out and did not come back until the next evening. In silence he cleaned his rifle, then lay down to sleep. The soldiers in the dugout spoke in whispers so as not to disturb him; they knew very well how important a sniper is when you're holding defensive positions. The word went around that Danilov had accounted for seven Hitlerites during the day.

Several times that night the enemy laid a heavy mortar barrage on no-man's-land. Orders came down from battalion headquarters to keep the maximum number of men in the forward positions. The tension grew hourly.

In the morning Chistyakov awakened Danilov by pulling at his foot. "Listen," he said, "that damn Nazi got Tonya Lipilina. . . . Poor kid. They've just taken her to the dressing station."

The greatcoat covering Danilov flew off and the man was up in a flash, his fingers dug into the sergeant-major's shoulders, eyelids puffy from sleep trembling and lips parted to reveal two rows of strong white teeth.

"What did you say?" he whispered hoarsely. "Tonya?"

"Uh-huh. But they say she wasn't killed outright."

"Not killed outright!" Danilov cast a furious look at Chistyakov, pulled himself up as required by regulations, and asked: "May I have fifteen minutes to go down to the dressing station?"

When Danilov got there Tonya was about to be sent on to the rear. It was a taut, stern-featured Danilov who

stopped beside her stretcher. "I slipped up this time, Stepan..." she said apologetically, trying to smile in spite of the pain that twisted her features. "I think he's at the twin aspens on your sector..." Danilov bent over her and clumsily touched her cheek with his hand. "Tonya," he said huskily, "I'll get him, Tonya!"

That evening no one played the accordion in the dug-out. One after the other the soldiers left to take their posts in the trenches, casting heavy shadows on the wall as they passed the flickering yellow flame of the oil lamp. Danilov returned from the company commander late and at once began, with greater deliberation than usual, to prepare to set out for his post. He checked his telescope sight, looked over his ammunition and wiped each cartridge separately. Then he changed his boots, stowed two biscuits under his coat and set out.

He stopped at the last embrasure on the right flank of the company's sector where Guryev was stationed, and stayed with him until the first bluish glow appeared on the eastern horizon. Finally, after the company commander had come over several times to see how things were going, he got up.

"Going?" said Guryev in a tense voice. "Maybe you ought to rest a bit more."

"Time to rest after the war... in Sochi," Danilov muttered as he crawled noiselessly over the parapet and disappeared in the tremulous half-gloom.

To Guryev it seemed as if the hardly discernible hillock some hundred metres from the parapet had swallowed up the little soldier. Had he been able to go forward, however, he would have seen among the tufts of last year's grass a pair of alert grey eyes slowly and methodically surveying every mound and hollow in front of the enemy's

forward positions. The terrain was familiar enough—two slender aspens to the right, an open field pitted with shell craters to the left. Nothing new—except for the rounded top of a helmet covered with camouflage netting showing beyond the aspens. Then the helmet shifted barely perceptibly. Danilov's lips curled: the German must be a fool if he thought Danilov would fall for that bait!

Yet where was the man, himself? Disregarding the poorly camouflaged helmet, Danilov shifted his eyes a bit to the left. There he was! The discovery all but made him start. He narrowed his eyes in excitement, but the next moment he had himself in hand and he gripped his rifle as if he had his fingers around the enemy's throat.

To get the crossed hairlines of his rifle sight on the smallest of the hummocks ahead he had to turn only about twenty degrees. But hardly had he moved when a bullet whistled overhead. No, there was no need to wait any longer, and Danilov, the corners of his wind-chapped lips tightly pursed, pressed on the trigger. The hummock split as if slashed by a sudden sabre blow. From behind it an arm was flung out convulsively and a German pot helmet rolled to one side. . . .

"We were together for a long time, all the way to the Oder," Rogov wound up his story, relighting the dead butt of his cigarette.

"Tell us more about him, Pavel Gordeyevich!" Cherepanov asked. "Was he killed?"

"He was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. I am certain he came through safe and sound," Rogov said as he got up from the step he had been sitting on. "People like him do not die. I can tell you any number of interesting stories about him, if you'd like to hear them, but we'll have to leave that for some other time. There's

something I wanted to take up with you tonight. Now listen, fellows. . . ."

For no less than an hour the even voice of Rogov could be heard on the viaduct alternating with Cherepanov's unsteady bass and occasional outbursts of animated discussion when everybody spoke at once. At last the hewer crew moved off in full strength to see the engineer home. And when they finally parted, Cherepanov clasped Rogov's hand.

"You can count on us, Pavel Gordeyevich," he said, nodding toward his comrades who were now respectfully silent. "We won't let you down."

CHAPTER VIII

The sun was still concealed behind the hills but a blue light had already spread over the entire dome of the sky. At a dizzy height a solitary rose-hued wisp of a cloud proclaimed the coming of day to the awakening world.

When Rogov, accompanied by Ocheredko, reached the supply warehouse where a new scraper transporter was to be assembled for testing, Cherepanov's crew was already there. The young miners were so engrossed in what their crew leader was saying that they did not notice the arrival of the engineer and section superintendent. Cherepanov was speaking in a low voice, punctuating his discourse at frequent intervals with a questioning "Is that clear?" This was the first time Rogov had seen the crew leader properly. He was a tall young man with clean-cut, handsome features and smooth, rounded gestures.

"I'll put it to the vote. Who's for?" Cherepanov asked.

Still unaware of Rogov's presence, the five young miners unanimously raised their hands.

“And now I want to tell you this,” Cherepanov slowly pushed his big hands into the pockets of his canvas trousers. “That is a political decision we’ve just taken. If we don’t make a go of it we’ll be disgracing the name of Hero, and no chiefs will be able to help us either.”

“Hear that, Pavel Gordeyevich?” Ocheredko whispered over Rogov’s shoulder. “Upon my word, I doubt whether anything will ever come of those boys. Talk too much for miners.”

Without answering, Rogov went over to the miners.

“Been holding a bit of a meeting,” Cherepanov reported in some confusion. “Took up an important question, but we’re going to keep it dark for the time being.”

Rogov explained to Cherepanov what had to be done in preparation for the assembly of the transporter. Promising to send over Dubintsev, the technician, he went to the office. Ocheredko trotted along with him and, encouraged by the district engineer’s silence, expounded some vague plan or another.

“What do you expect?” Ocheredko rambled on, as though arguing with someone. “Of course the section’s been lagging behind for a long time. But if you want to know, we’ve been gathering strength in the meantime and there even have been spurts of enthusiasm which we’ve had to dampen a little.”

“What was that?” Rogov slowed down his pace.

“Not deliberately of course,” the other hastily explained. “Only we didn’t want to waste our energy on all sorts of piddling things. But now in a day or two we’ll put on a show that’ll make the whole pit sit up and take notice. More than that, it’ll shake up the whole Kuzbas! You’ll see! The fact is I’m organizing a record. I’ve already spoken to the chap—a miner I’ve got, a regular giant of a

man. Of course we'll have to make him a present of a length of suiting and maybe throw in some other trifle."

"Throw in what? I don't quite see. . . ."

"It's simple enough. Got to promise him a premium. You can be sure it'll pay. A certain three thousand per cent."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Don't you know our Derenkov?" Ocheredko said with a note of surprise in his voice. "I'd advise you to study people more closely, Pavel Gordeyevich. I know this Derenkov inside out—enterprising fellow. Came here during the war. Where he'd been before I don't know, and I don't care either. The important thing is that he can make a smashing good showing at the face—that is, if he wants to, or if you promise him an extra bonus. Here's how I look at it: what's the use of fussing around with a dozen greenhorns like these trade school chaps when there's somebody like Derenkov around. I'm telling you all this because I want to ask your permission to set that record."

"Now listen here," Rogov spoke slowly and deliberately, stressing every word. "You're not going to get any permission from me for circus turns. You'd better learn to think before you act. And now go back to Cherepanov's crew and give the lads a hand."

Ocheredko opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind, nervously adjusted his cap and walked off. Rogov telephoned Drobot.

"No, I can't let you go down the mine today," the chief protested. "We've a whole string of conferences scheduled."

To Rogov's annoyance there really was a succession of meetings, one after the other. First there was a conference with section superintendents and district engineers

at which Drobot let loose for no particular reason at "certain young executives" who were flouting the mine's established traditions. During the tirade Rogov exchanged glances with Starodubtsev.

"Giving it to you, isn't he?" the transport chief's eyes asked. "I'm getting used to it," Rogov's glance replied.

Then followed a conference with mine foremen and finally a lengthy discussion of safety measures and inventions. Drobot himself reported on the worker-inventors' efforts, limiting himself to vague generalities.

Dubintsev passed a note across the table to Rogov. "Good news," it read, "I'm getting married. But Drobot refused to grant me leave of absence. Can you put in a good word for me? Take a look at Khomyakov. The old fellow seems a bit down in the mouth."

Rogov wrote in a large hand on the reverse side. "Congratulations! She's a splendid girl. I'll do what I can." He shot a glance at Khomyakov sitting in a corner of the office. The old mine surveyor was evidently not listening to what Drobot was saying; his face was expressionless except for a stamp of infinite weariness. "Anything wrong?" Rogov scribbled on a scrap of paper and ignoring an irritated look from Drobot tossed the note to Khomyakov. The latter read it, brightened up at this mark of attention and quickly nodded as if to say: "Yes, very much so."

"But isn't there anything more definite to say about work with inventors?" a man with a high forehead and merry brown eyes interrupted Drobot impatiently.

"The new Party organizer," Dubintsev framed a silent answer with his lips to Rogov's unspoken question.

"There's very little inventing being done," Drobot rapped.

"True enough!" Rogov muttered.

Finally the meeting ended, but there was no sense in going down into the pit, for the Stakhanovite gathering was due to start in three hours' time. On the way out Rogov stopped Khomyakov in the corridor.

"Yes, I am worried," the mine surveyor said. "A very nasty thing has happened on the job."

"What is it—or is it a secret?" Rogov asked cautiously.

"I don't really know . . . it might have to be kept a secret, though. But I am sure I can rely on you."

And in a low agitated voice, Khomyakov told Rogov that when he had made the last regular monthly measurement of the coal in the bunkers he had discovered a shortage of fourteen thousand tons.

"I haven't been myself ever since," Khomyakov looked up helplessly at Rogov with his small, nearsighted eyes.

"I don't see where the secret comes in," the engineer frowned.

He was shocked by the expression of dismay bordering on fear on the old mine surveyor's face.

"You must report your discovery to Drobot at once."

"But that's just the trouble, man," Khomyakov heaved a deep sigh. "I've reported it to him at least five times. I even turned in a written report, and what do you think was the result? I was told that I'd forgotten arithmetic in my old age."

"And now you're memorizing your multiplication tables, I suppose?"

"Pavel Gordeyevich!" Khomyakov drew himself up and flushed scarlet.

Just then the new Party organizer came up to them. "How do you do, Comrade Rogov," he said, gripping the engineer's hand. "My name's Bondarchuk. I'm the new Party organizer. I wanted to have a talk with you today, but seeing there's the Stakhanovite meeting we'll have to put it off until tomorrow. Agreed?"

The two went off together to the dispatching room.

"I must admit that I still feel like a guest here," Bondarchuk said, smiling. "It's a good sign though to be starting with an event as pleasant as the presentation of the banner."

"You are lucky," Rogov observed.

"You mean it's a matter of chance?" Bondarchuk threw a brief but searching glance at the engineer.

"No, I wouldn't say that...."

"All right, we'll let it go at that..." the Party organizer nodded. "So I'll see you tomorrow?"

Rogov nodded agreement and his keen, firm glance met Bondarchuk's merry, brown eyes.

CHAPTER IX

To Rogov Stakhanovite gatherings always seemed to open boundless vistas where momentous things could be expected to happen at any instant. Today, however, he felt self-conscious and out of place as if he were there by special invitation. There were very few men present from his district.

The spacious vestibule of the club was crowded with hundreds of Stakhanovites. There was at once a festive yet businesslike air about the gathering. The men who had come together had known one another for years both at work and outside of the mine, and they shared the

same hopes, the same achievements. The solid hum of voices, the exchange of smiles and greetings, and the atmosphere of uplift, usually attendant upon holidays and other festive occasions, all combined to infuse each of the miners with a firm faith in their joint strength, the might of the collective.

Many of them were strangers to Rogov, and he surveyed them with all the greater interest—tomorrow, perhaps, they would become his closest friends.

His eyes came to rest on two miners walking side by side with their hands behind their backs and heads thrown slightly back, both with such powerful frames that the heavy oak parquet floor seemed to groan under their feet. One was in the neighbourhood of fifty; the other, no more than twenty. Father and son? They didn't look it, yet they represented two generations of miners. The elder man had probably hewn coal in the Michelson Anzherka pits before the revolution, while the younger could not have been working at the face more than a year or two. And one had but to look at him to know that he must be making a good job of it too. They paused near Rogov.

"There are a lot of mines in the Kuzbas," the elder one was saying. "I passed some of them on my way back from the health resort. You can't see much from a car window, but just the same it was a powerful sight!"

"What I wanted to tell you, Mitrich," the younger man tried to edge in a word, "was that. . . ."

"Now listen here, young man," Mitrich went on, tapping with his foot. "I'm telling you that you've got to keep abreast of everybody else. If miners from the Fizkulturnik in Anzherka, the Butovka in Kemerovo and the Zhurinka in Leninsk challenge you to emulate them, you've got to take them on."

"It's a tall order though, with all those people..."

"Nonsense! Anyone would think you were a stranger here. We Kuzbas folk aren't scared of such things!"

Somewhere in the crowd Rogov caught a glimpse of Dubintsev and Annushka. There was such bliss written on their faces that one might have assumed that the whole meeting had been called specially for them, and that the whole world existed only to gladden their hearts. Annushka waved to Rogov and then disappeared from sight. At that moment someone touched Rogov's arm.

"Hullo, Cherepanov!" The engineer brightened up. "How're things coming along?"

"Ocheredko's been cussing us again," the young miner said, and two fine creases appeared on his smooth dark forehead as he nodded toward the door and complained. "They won't let my crew in because we're not Stakhanovites. The fellows are furious. Somehow I managed to push through. But it's not fair to the boys to keep them out."

"What did they say?" Rogov asked.

"They said they're going to make the whole mine sit up and take notice so that next time they'll be met with flags and bands. They were hopping mad!"

The club manager was seen pushing his way over to Rogov from the direction of the entrance.

"Do you mind telling your young people to behave!" he called out to the engineer, pointing to the door. "They sent me to you."

At the front entrance Cherepanov's crew in full muster was holding a meeting of its own.

"The bureaucrats!" indignantly shouted a stocky blond lad whose name Rogov could not remember. "Can't you do something about it, Pavel Gordeyevich? They tell

us we're not Stakhanovites. Have you ever heard the like?"

The youngsters' outburst amused Rogov. He had little trouble in persuading them to return to their hostel, arguing that Cherepanov was at the meeting and that the club wasn't big enough to hold everybody anyway.

"Did they make a big fuss?" Cherepanov asked anxiously as he and Rogov took their places side by side in the large auditorium.

"No. But they were hopping mad," Rogov repeated the crew leader's words "And so was I."

"You?"

"Certainly. Mad at you. Do you realize what honours you might have earned? You could have got elected to the presidium instead of being stopped at the door. That hurts! Well, let it go at that. Let's listen to what people have got to say."

The first speaker was a well-known hewer named Khmelchenko from District Three.

"I got a letter from Derenkov, a miner in the neighbouring district," he said, "suggesting I compete with him. All right, I thought, let's compete, Comrade Derenkov! But that letter set me thinking and I didn't like the looks of it."

"How's that?" came a voice from the auditorium.

"Just a minute, I'll explain," the forty-year-old miner responded, emerging from behind the rostrum and leaning against it in full view of the now subdued audience.

His massive shoulders, the way he bore his small square-browed head, and his keen eyes shining from under dark eyebrows left no doubt in the onlooker's mind that this was a real miner, a man who knew his job thoroughly and who would not mince words.

"That's what I took the floor for," he went on. "Now to begin with, what is a Stakhanovite? As I see it, he's a man who puts his heart and soul into his job. That's what a Stakhanovite is."

"Stop beating about the bush!" Ocheredko interrupted.

"I beg your pardon!" Khmelchenko held out the palm of his hand in front of him like a shield. "I beg your pardon! I would ask you not to get me rattled."

"Let him speak!" the audience shouted.

Bondarchuk tapped on a water carafe with his pencil.

"Continue, Comrade Khmelchenko."

"Now, when I read this here letter I somehow didn't see Derenkov putting his heart and soul into his job." Khmelchenko went on slowly and deliberately, as if hammering in nails. "Here's what he writes: 'I propose to fulfil the daily quota by no less than one hundred per cent and to make three outstanding records a month.' That sounds more like a circus act to me. How can we expect to carry out the five-year plan in four years if we work like that?"

Rogov looked around from the corner of his eye to see what effect these words had on the audience. Suddenly he heard Cherepanov shouting insistently next to his ear:

"May I have the floor?"

"Name?" Bondarchuk inquired.

"Cherepanov," the young crew leader stood up and promptly dropped back into his seat.

Rogov could hear him breathing heavily.

An expectant murmur ran through the audience. On the platform Khmelchenko was punctuating his speech with sweeping gestures.

"So, comrades, I'm not going to compete with anybody like that, say what you will. . . . That's all."

Desultory applause broke out in the hall as he returned slowly to his seat, picking his way through the crowded presidium as if treading some narrow unfamiliar ledge in a strange goaf. Then, as he sat down, the whole meeting seemed to rise in an outburst of approval.

"Hear, hear!" thundered in the hall.

Bondarchuk rose and waited with head bent for the applause to subside. When the hall grew quiet, he gave the floor to the next speaker.

"Cherepanov!"

The crew leader quickly climbed onto the stage and began speaking, though with an obvious effort.

"I want to say this on behalf of my crew. . . ." At first he gasped for air, buttoning his green jacket askew in his nervousness, but then got into the swing of his speech. "There are six of us, all finished vocational school recently. We're in the seventh section. We look at it like this: carrying out the five-year plan in four years and maybe in three is just the same as fighting at the front. . . . We're going to study hard and learn to be good miners. Our chief, engineer Rogov is going to teach us! The crew asked me to challenge the best miner to compete with us. That means you, Comrade Khmelchenko!" Cherepanov politely nodded in the direction of the presidium where Khmelchenko was vigorously rubbing his flushed face with the palm of his hand. "And we also want the whole crew to be present at the next Stakhanovite meeting. That's what we've decided."

"Listen to them!" a deep woman's voice was heard from the audience.

Khmelchenko was clapping vigorously and the hall responded with thunderous applause. At that moment Drobot stepped onto the stage from the wings. He too

clapped his hands sedately, then whispered a question to Filenkov. The chief engineer smiled and nodded in the direction of Cherepanov. The young miner, encouraged by the general approval, wound up his short speech:

"There's one more thing I want to say: we declare ourselves a Komsomol crew named after Hero of the Soviet Union Stepan Danilov."

Once again there was a storm of handclapping, once again warm smiles spread on people's faces. Bondarchuk rose.

"Are there any motions?"

"Let the fellows get to work!"

"We've got to back up the boys!"

"I'll drop in at the face to see you tomorrow," Khmelchenko said to Cherepanov as he reached across the table to shake hands with the young miner.

After Cherepanov three more speakers took the floor, among them Ocheredko, who delivered himself of a long, rambling, incoherent oration, glancing at his notes and clearing his throat at frequent intervals.

An intermission was called and after that a representative from the coal field head office presented the challenge banner to the mine. Drobot responded with a speech compounded of the proper proportions of pride for the joint achievement, promises not to rest on the laurels won and reproaches levelled at the laggards.

Rogov wrote a note to the presidium and watched it passed from row to row until it reached Bondarchuk. The Party organizer read it and smiled his approval, then studied the engineer searchingly as the latter strode up to the platform.

"I would much prefer not to have to dampen the festive atmosphere of this occasion..." Rogov began.

"A spoon of tar in a barrel of honey!" Drobot's lips twisted in expectation of the worst.

"A ladleful, I'm afraid!" Rogov retorted, barely able to control the anger welling up in him, and immediately felt a chill wafted up from the now silent audience.

Spreading out a large sheet of drawing paper, he pinned it to the front of the rostrum where everyone could see it.

"In these coloured graphs I have endeavoured to depict not only the present condition of our mine, but also its future. If we don't improve preparatory work, we shall lose the banner in a month, and whatever remains of our reputation will be gone in two or three months."

"Demagogy!" Drobot said quite distinctly, demonstratively shifting his chair.

The hall buzzed

"Let him speak!" Khmelchenko cried sharply.

Bondarchuk waited calmly until the noise died down and then nodded to the engineer:

"Continue, please."

"Some people here will not like what I have to say," Rogov went on, raising his voice slightly. "It seems to me, however, that for all its festive character, today's meeting is a continuation of our common efforts, and hence I have the right to tell the truth here, no matter how unpleasant it may be. The mine as you know has 320 coal hewers, but only 221 of them are fulfilling their output quotas. Only 73 have a Stakhanovite output showing. Now, are men like Khmelchenko, Voshchin and the several dozen others who are turning out one and a half to two times their quotas really augmenting the wealth of our state as they would seem to be doing? Unfortunately not. They—these foremost of our people—are simply

‘working for those who prefer to take it easy. Let us see why this is so.’

Rogov could now feel that the audience’s interest had been roused and he could see hundreds of eyes boring into him with the impatient question: “Yes, what is the cause?”

At that moment, when the tension had reached its peak, a voice rang out from the hall:

“It was you they wrote about in the paper, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was...” Rogov tried to pick out the heckler from the sea of faces. “But we’re not discussing that article now...”

“You’re forcing the meeting to discuss it!” the same voice interrupted him.

“Why don’t you speak about your own district lagging behind? That’d be more to the point!” someone else shouted from the depths of the audience.

“Who asked you to answer for the pit?”

Feeling that the invisible bond he had had with his hearers was about to snap, Rogov gripped the polished edge of the rostrum with all his strength, his head lowered and shoulders sagging. The seconds hurtled on but he was still powerless to overcome the spasm of anger that convulsed him. His eyes sought out the Party organizer. The latter rose.

“Just a moment, Comrade Rogov,” he said and turned to the hall. Running his finger against the red velvet covering of the presidium table, he addressed the meeting, his words ringing clear though he did not raise his voice. “It’s wrong to put the matter like that. We, all of us here, answer for the pit just as we answer for our districts, sections, and seams. We cannot tell engineer Rogov or anyone else present here what he should talk

about. Therefore I should like to ask him to continue Comrade Rogov. . . ."

The Party organizer's words released the tension; they were like a breath of fresh air in suffocating heat. Rogov squared his shoulders, his eyes lit up, and he spoke in a measured voice, perhaps more dryly and slowly than usual.

"I shall come to District Two later. But just now I should like to look into the future. Let us do it together."

There was a tremor in his voice as he asked his audience softly:

"I wonder whether you realize that the future of the Kapitalnaya is bound up with the glorious future of our whole country? Do all of you really see that?"

"Now, we are all responsible for our country as a whole no less than for our particular seams, sections and pits! If that is so, then can we set any specific limits to our efforts and our determination to storm new fortresses of knowledge and carry out new tasks set by the Party, by life itself? There are no such limits, any more than there was a limit to our efforts when we fought to defend our Soviet soil, when we shielded the whole world from the enemy. No, there are no such limits! We have won the challenge banner; that is excellent as far as it goes. But the banner is a token of past achievement, and here we are looking into the future. To try to push into that morrow with our past skill and organization, is like trying to empty the sea with a spoon. What has our mine relied on so far? The mechanics of it has been simple enough: where there should have been two workers at the face, we place three. . . ."

"And even more!" a voice from the audience supported the speaker.

"But that sort of thing can't continue! It's wrong, it's contrary to the interests of the state. By the end of the five-year plan the country's miners are to turn out two hundred and fifty million tons of coal, and in some fifteen or twenty years from now the figure has to go up to five hundred million. What are we going to do then? How many more miners will be needed to achieve these output levels? That's why we've got to start thinking about this now. And we shall begin by radically changing our views about the pit. It isn't the old-time pit any more where everything depended on chance, where you'd work a face if the roof held and shifted to another if it didn't. We can't allow the seam to dictate to the miner, it must be the other way round. The mine's a big factory which is always changing—where each working is a shop in itself with its own peculiarities that keep altering from day to day; because of that this factory of ours demands a great deal of knowledge from its executives and skill from its workers. This factory and each of its shops must have an iron-bound plan at once, a precisely timed production cycle. Without it we cannot make headway, without it all our efforts, no matter how strenuous, will be in vain."

Rogov no longer was in a hurry with his message, for he felt that every word he uttered fell on receptive soil. At the back of the hall he saw Cherepanov's swarthy face looking up at him with rapt attention; in one of the forward rows was Nekrasov, listening with his eyes half-closed and his head nodding slightly; next to him was Voshchin, clasping his knee with his hands, his head bent to one side as if looking somewhere into the distance. It was the glorious Tomorrow the men were envisioning.

Rogov continued to speak.

"We must shift all the heavy work to machines!"

A murmur swept through the hall.

"Machines, comrades, otherwise we'll lag behind, we'll be marking time and never getting anywhere! Our hauling is all but fully mechanized, but we load the coal on the conveyors at the face and do the mucking by hand. Hundreds of towns and thousands of villages wrecked by the Nazis look to us for light and warmth; how can we rest on yesterday's laurels?"

There no longer was a single indifferent or inattentive person in the hall; hundreds of hearts beat faster and it seemed that the meeting was looking at Rogov with a single pair of eyes, tremendous, demanding. Bondarchuk was writing rapidly in his notebook. Cherepanov rose from his seat and before either he or his neighbours were aware of what he was doing, he was at the ramp. Volsichin's short, steel-strong fingers gripped the armrests of his seat.

"Comrades," Rogov went on, casting a quick glance at the presidium and noticing with surprise that Filenkov's eyes, usually so expressionless, were alight with enthusiasm. "Comrades, I am not trying to scare you—that would be useless, for you are not easily scared. I am appealing to your conscience and asking you: What are we waiting for?"

Once more he turned to the presidium and, looking Drobot straight in the eye, raised his voice.

"I have no faith in what you said in your jubilee speech today, Comrade Drobot. None whatever! Either you do not realize, or you do not want to realize that the collective is bound hand and foot by conservatism! It is said that Kapitalnaya has more machinery than any of the other pits in the field. That's true enough, but the

machines are stacked up in warehouses—and that means freezing potentialities and amounts to nothing short of theft! Why have nine pumps, two electric traction motors and six conveyor driveheads gone out of commission in our pit this month alone? And why weren't these mishaps put down in the accident register as they should have been? What are we doing? Playing hide-and-seek with our own conscience? We are told that so long as the plan is fulfilled, it doesn't matter how we do it, even if we carry up the coal by capfuls. No, we refuse to work like that! Our state cannot draw up plans to be fulfilled by capfuls, it does not need such slow and costly production."

Rogov would have gone on without pausing but a stir ran through the audience as if the surging waves of the sea had swept into the hall, and it broke into voice.

"Quite right, Engineer Rogov!"

Someone stretched both arms toward the presidium and shouted:

"May I have the floor? Chairman, may I have the floor?"

"Continue," Bondarchuk nodded to the speaker.

Rogov's mouth was parched from sheer excitement, but he did not dare to reach out for the glass of water next to him for fear of losing sight of his hearers if only for a moment.

"In other words, the two things we must tackle with all our energy are mechanization from face to bunkers and the introduction of an inviolable production cycle. There can be no more leaving things to chance in our pit. Each man must know what he is going to do and how he will do it during the shift. This is a difficult path to take, it will be a stiff uphill climb, but it's the shortest way to success. Forging ahead along this path our coal-mining

industry will be able to release tens of thousands of workers to build roads and towns, dig canals and sow grain.... Our Homeland needs every pair of capable hands it possesses!"

Rogov paused to catch his breath and glance at Bondarchuk.

"Now I want to say something about District Two," he went on. "We're ready to go over to high-speed drift driving, mechanization and a strict production cycle. We're not going to waste a single hour.... You know Afanasi Petrovich Voshchin, don't you?"

The meeting responded with an affirmative hum.

"And Nekrasov?"

"Aye!"

"And they're not the only ones in District Two.... Have you got confidence in them?"

A brief reverberating roll of applause answered him from the hall. Rogov bowed his head.

"Thank you, comrades. Not a single shift in District Two will let you down."

In a daze Rogov walked unsteadily into the wings where he almost collided with the pit manager.

"Well, engineer," Drobot made a half-turn toward Rogov and slowly extended his hand, "you made a good job of it.... You crucified me good and proper. I shan't forget it."

Before Rogov could reply, Bondarchuk came up. Lighting up, he raised the match to the engineer's face, chuckled, and dropped his eyes to the glowing tip of the cigarette.

"I would say that our first talk has already taken place, Pavel Gordeyevich. Good."

CHAPTER X

When the local paper had run a rather sharply worded article entitled "Engineer Experiments" the week before, Rogov had been much annoyed, but it had not even occurred to him to protest to the editors against this attack on himself. This morning was another matter. He was stopped at the pithead by Nekrasov who silently unfolded the latest issue of *Battle for Coal* and pointed with a stubby finger at a brief item under the heading "Productivity Down in District Two."

Rogov flushed angrily as he read the twenty-line item. The reporter had shamelessly twisted the facts. The item was about Nekrasov's crew whose Stakhanov work rightly constituted the pride of the district.

"It's an outrage!" Rogov snapped and thrust the paper into the miner's hand.

The latter calmly rolled himself a cigarette.

"Ought to be looked into, Pavel Gordeyevich," he remarked. "It's getting to be a bit awkward."

Pressed though he was for time, Rogov made up his mind to pay a visit to the editorial office.

... He looked into one room, then another, but there was nobody in sight. Somewhere a typewriter was clicking. In a third room, so tiny as to be little more than a cubbyhole, he finally found someone: a short fair-haired man who was shouting into the telephone, jotting down notes, smoking a cigarette and blowing the ashes off the desk all at once. Nodding to Rogov he managed to extend his elbow to him in lieu of a handclasp and again bellowed into the receiver.

"Don't try to give me the run-around! I know the situation at your pit—you won't be able to keep up with

Kapitalnaya whatever you do. Listen, you duffer, you go ahead and we'll give you support!"

Tossing the receiver back on the hook and crushing his cigarette at the same time, he looked at Rogov absently and began talking as if the latter had been there all along.

"Can you imagine that Remennikov from the Tenth putting up such a front? 'What do I care for Kapitalnaya,' he says, 'when I already have eight high-speed faces going! You're just a lot of shuttlecocks,' he says, 'you don't know an innovation when you see it.' Just think of him telling me that! Can you imagine me missing anything new? Why, it's enough to give a fellow heart failure!"

"Of course," Rogov put in politely, although he had not the slightest idea what heart failure had to do with it.

"Absolutely!" the other chattered on, turning over a stack of copy on his desk. "I hung on the wire all night. At Black Hill, Mikhailov's tackled four faces at once, and at Three-Three-Bis—wait a minute, what was there at the Three-Three-Bis?—oh yes, you know Nikolayenko? Well, he's come out with an automatic loading scheme that puts the coal on the conveyor straight from the face after blasting. Grand, isn't it! I'd like to have a try at it myself. Then there's Kapitalnaya—that fellow Rogov has pulled another one out of his sleeve . . . put three workings on a two-cycle schedule. Two cycles a day! I'm damned if I can figure him out—can't tell whether he's scoring or producing a string of duds. And when I ask Drobot about it he says you don't count your chickens before they're hatched. As for me, I can't wait for the hatching—I've got to lend people a hand at once."

"Didn't you give this man Rogov a bit of a roasting the other day?" Rogov interrupted him in a low voice.

"Roasting?" the newsman said and then burst into laughter. "Didn't you hear how we caught it at the City Committee for that item. . . ." Suddenly the young man faltered. "Here, wait a minute. . . I thought I knew you, but now I'm not so sure," he added slowly.

Rogov nodded.

"Fact is, we haven't met before. I'm Rogov."

"Rogov!" the young man leapt up from his chair, muttered under his breath "Fool that I am," and coming out from behind the desk stretched out his hand to the engineer.

Rogov told him about the latest item

"Can't be! Just a moment. . . Who was it now? Oh yes. It was Chernov. The devil. . . ."

"Perhaps we ought to speak to this Chernov?" Rogov asked.

"Speak to him? Why not? I'll arrange it," the man agreed readily. "But . . . how shall I put it. . . ."

"Just tell him," advised Rogov.

"That's right. . . . In general, you can figure out the penalty for Chernov yourself. And if that isn't enough, I as head of the department . . ."

Rogov told him not to bother and asked him to call in Chernov.

Soon a round-headed, bright-eyed young man was rather awkwardly shaking Rogov's hand as he introduced himself.

"Now, look here, Chernov," the department head hurried to put in. "You'd better talk to Comrade Rogov about that item of yours. And, mind, make a clean breast of it!"

Chernov evidently wanted to protest, but his superior repeated with emphasis:

"You'll talk it over with the comrade engineer. Understand?"

"Supposing we drop over to the mine so you can see for yourself," Rogov suggested. "Been long on the paper?" he asked the young man on the way out.

"A year and a half," Chernov willingly informed him. "And I'm fed right up to here with it," he added slapping himself on the neck.

"How's that?"

"You see, I'm a bit of a poet, but how can I turn out decent verse when all my energy goes into chasing news?"

"Oh, I see," Rogov responded. "So you don't like working on the paper?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that. . . ."

"A sort of inner conflict, is that it?"

"You know how it is," the young man conceded. "There are times when you think you can't stand it any more, but you just can't break loose. The work seems to carry you along."

"You're not doing so badly," the engineer smiled. "Quite the reverse, if you ask me!"

"You mean it? Exactly in what respect?"

"I was thinking of the item about Nekrasov's crew in today's paper."

"Oh, that. . . ." Chernov gave a disappointed wave of the hand.

"Not such a good example, eh?"

"Not very. But thereby hangs a tale. . . ."

They reached the mine just before the shift went down. Inviting the reporter to come along, Rogov went straight to the fifth section's room.

With the exception of the crew leader himself, Nekrasov's crew was there in full strength.

"He's waiting for you down at the section, comrade chief," a young miner told Rogov. "He's thought up a real idea, Nekrasov has. You'll see for yourself!"

"Is that so?" Rogov evinced surprise. "Good, I was just going down there. In the meantime, get acquainted. . . ." He glanced at the reporter. "This is the comrade who wrote the article about your crew Chernov's the name. Here's your chance to have a heart-to-heart talk with him."

Winking at the miners, he turned to go. Behind him he heard someone deliberately heave a loud sigh and another say in an ominous tone:

"So you're the fellow . . ."

Half an hour later Rogov was down at the section.

Ever since the meeting of Stakhanovites he had been conscious of an inner glow, a feeling of uplift emanating from the collective, as if his speech at the meeting had given the miners a new start. "But isn't that a conceited way of looking at it, to put it mildly?" he would ask himself. "It's a long way from good speeches to a well-organized face!"

Nekrasov's men were now in a new working that had been just cut. It was a flat seam, damp and with two veins of rock running through—not an easy seam to work. The crew leader, though by no means downhearted, was a trifle worried.

Concern was written all over his face as he met the engineer.

"You can chop my head off if you want to," Nekrasov said as he hurried after Rogov. "What you said at the

meeting got me, wouldn't give me any peace. So I thought I'd try this rationalization scheme."

"Gives you no peace, you say?" bending forward slightly, Rogov glanced at the miner's face.

"Yes, Pavel Gordeyevich!" Nekrasov livened up still more. "All last night I was talking it over with my old woman. She says: 'Why are you so restless, what's the trouble?' 'See here, mother,' I says, 'there are thousands of miners in Kuzbas. It's night now and some of them are working and others are resting, but I'm sure they're all thinking about their job, worrying about how to do it better. And one gets an idea that works, while another just can't make any headway. Just think of it!'"

Nekrasov lapsed into silence. With a deep sigh, he admitted that he had everything in readiness for the experiment, but was still a bit chary of going ahead with it. Wouldn't Pavel Gordeyevich lend him a hand; at least tell him why it failed if the thing didn't work out?

"Suppose you tell me what it's all about?" Rogov said.

"Right away, Pavel Gordeyevich. . . You'll see for yourself in a minute. Let's take a look at it," Nekrasov fidgeted nervously.

They went up to the seam.

"Everything ready, Filya?" Nekrasov shouted into the depths of the working.

Some ten metres away someone cleared his throat, there was the crunch of coal underfoot, another cough, and then Filya himself appeared. It seemed to Rogov that the man's bulk filled the whole two-metre space between the timbers and the coal. His face was surprisingly small and round, with a perky, turned-up nose.

"Some physique, eh?" Nekrasov said, shaking his head from side to side. "He's a newcomer. I've told him more than once to go easy or he might knock me over without meaning to—if he did, the old woman would find herself a widow."

"Aw, stow it, Uncle Gavril," growled the newcomer good-naturedly. "One of these days I'll lose my temper!"

"That's all right, don't mind me. . . . Well, are you all set?"

The other reported that the boreholes had already been loaded.

"Let 'er have it, then," the crew leader hurried the blaster.

All three of them went into the conveyor drift.

Rogov had watched skilled shot-firers at work many a time. Each had his own way of going about the job—some worked with a sort of flourish, others were irritatingly methodical, but in the last moment before the blast they all were very much alike. Filya, too, did what dozens of others had done before him—with an accustomed movement he pushed his cap over his forehead, inserted the key into the contactor and, shouting "Fi-i-re!" turned it.

The ground shook. The blast waves slapped them in the back, then battered at their chests; rock dust came down from the roof in a fine powder.

Coughing from the sweetish fumes, Nekrasov said:

"You'd better switch on the conveyor yourself, Pavel Gordeyevich."

Rogov seized the starting lever and gave it a light turn.

The motor responded with a rising whine and a crunching noise came from under the coal broken from the breast of the seam. Then the coal stirred as if some monster underneath strained to free itself from its weight. Slow-

ly the chunks rolled down from the crest of the heap and the black mass began to move down the working.

Rogov at once appreciated this simple but ingenious way of using a scraper conveyor.

Nekrasov wiped the sweat off his brow.

"Well, Pavel Gordeyevich, that's the long and short of it," he said with studied calm. "This means we'll cope with the new schedule. Without mechanization we couldn't have done it in this seam—not with these three layers of coal which have got to come down separately...."

He broke off, evidently not wishing to detain the engineer, but the desire to talk about his successful innovation got the better of him.

"Now the main thing, Pavel Gordeyevich, is not setting up a scraper conveyor in the seam, but placing it flat against the floor," he said. "You shift the transporter right next to the breast, under the stretch you're going to blast, and then let the coal come down on it of itself. It'll collect no less than thirty per cent of all the coal you've blasted. As for the rest, well, you can see for yourself," Nekrasov finished, pointing to the flowing stream of coal.

Rogov pushed his helmet from one ear to the other, feeling every bit as excited as the crew leader.

Nekrasov's idea was technically simple enough, and for all he knew some other mines might have already introduced it, yet the engineer was deeply moved and his heart filled with pride and admiration at the old miner's tenacity in carrying out his idea and his readiness to take the risk it involved.

"Good work, Gavril Semyonovich," Rogov said, unconsciously adopting Nekrasov's matter-of-fact tone. "Very good work, indeed. Now we'll have to see to it that

what you've started will be carried on. I'll call a meeting of the foremen and crew leaders in the district tomorrow so you can tell them about this automatic loader of yours."

"Will I have to make a speech?" Nekrasov said doubtfully, then added after a momentary pause: "All right, I'll do it, if it'll be of any use."

CHAPTER XI

Not a day passed but Rogov visited the heading where Voshchin was working. He was drawn there not because he was worried about any shortcomings in the miner's work or because he doubted his ability to make a good showing, but simply because Voshchin's working was to him like a sun-bathed eminence affording a clear view of distant vistas.

Voshchin was driving as much as two metres of drift per shift, besides training four miners on the job with a view to going over to the high-speed methods all around the clock. As he put it himself, he taught his understudies the knack "of counting the minutes without looking at the clock", otherwise the working was the same as any other. True, the loading was mechanized, the props were prepared on the surface and ventilation had been improved, but all this could as easily be introduced in any other working; everything depended on the desire and skill of the workers. As regards skill, it had to be admitted that Voshchin did everything well. And did it without much talk—he hardly ever spoke with his helper and did not like to have more people than necessary on the job.

Today, on his way to visit the drift, Rogov was surprised to hear Filenkov's reverberating laughter issuing from the working.

"Good work, old man!" the chief engineer was saying. "Soon they'll be making up songs about you!"

Noticing Rogov, Filenkov pushed him closer to the breast.

"Take a look at what Afanasi Petrovich's doing!" the chief engineer said. "Simple and damn clever."

Rogov guessed why Filenkov was so excited. Two days before, Voshchin had suggested a new way of mounting a core drill: not on an upright bar, as was the rule, but on a horizontal one. This would make it possible to drill not only one or two holes but a whole set from one position. This was an important timesaving device, for shifting drills is an operation that consumes a great deal of labour.

"Clever, very clever indeed," Filenkov repeated.

"You know there are still people around who claim that the pick and shovel are the main stand-bys in stone-drift work," Rogov could not help interrupting. "To tell the truth, Fyodor Lukich, I was inclined to think that you were one of them. . . ."

"What?" Filenkov looked up, then gave the other an understanding wink. "No need to get riled, Pavel Gordeyevich, I'm not bad all through."

"I did not say you were," Rogov replied tartly. "As a matter of fact, you're not at all bad—that is, when you aren't with Drobot in his office!"

He had put it more sharply than he had intended, but Rogov did not regret his words when he saw Filenkov start at the mention of Drobot's name and make a barely perceptible movement as if about to glance over his shoulder.

The upshot of it all was that Rogov again lost an opportunity for a serious talk with the chief engineer.

Filenkov fidgeted uneasily for a while, looked at Rogov several times, patted a prop for some inexplicable reason, and went off after promising to order the new drill mounting at once in the machine shop.

Voshchin nodded towards the receding Filenkov with something like pity in his glance.

"He's all right . . . though not always."

Rogov was amused by this indefinite statement so untypical of Voshchin, yet he continued in the same sharp manner.

"True enough, not always!" he said. "But you can't be half and half, Afanasi Petrovich. That's impossible. A Soviet citizen, and an engineer to boot, must have a clear idea of what he can and should do. But how can I tell what Filenkov is liable to do and what he wants, how do I know that what he says in the morning will hold good in the evening if Drobot doesn't happen to agree?"

Voshchin straightened up, looked keenly at the engineer, and brushing one end of his drooping moustache upward, shook his head.

"You're being a bit too hard on him, Pavel Gordeyevich. You can hammer at a block of wood or a piece of metal with all your might, but human being's got to be understood."

"Even a human being like Filenkov?"

"His kind in particular," Voshchin coughed. "That's the way I look at it. You say he hasn't any backbone, no opinion of his own? I think he has, only because of Drobot you can't see it. He and I had a talk about this machine just before you came." Voshchin pointed to the rock loader. "I told him there should be one at every face, but something should be figured out to prevent the drive-head from getting clogged up with rock dust. As I was

talking I watched Fyodor Lukich. And what do you think . I saw—why, the man looked all excited. His face brightened up and he began jotting down some notes in his notebook. So, Pavel Gordeyevich, in my opinion he's got a spark of something in him, only it's been covered up by ashes all this time. Give it a fresh breeze and that spark will begin to glow—sure as anything!"

Knowing that every minute counted, Rogov did not take up any more of the miner's time.

Voshchin and his helper were driving the winding main gallery which ran parallel to the seam. A sweetish smell still hung in the air from the previous blasting, but the two drills were again in action. As a matter of fact, half of the set had already been drilled. As he went about his work, Voshchin was even more taciturn than usual. His helper, a middle-aged man like himself, finished loading the last tram they had and pushed it off to a siding nearby.

"Where's Dimka?" Voshchin asked anxiously. "Got much left, Mikhailovich?"

"Another tramful," the helper replied. "Shall I go and look for him?"

"No need," Voshchin said. "He knows his job. He'll see to the empties."

In less than five minutes, however, Dimka dashed in-to view without any trams.

"The transport foreman's sending all the empties to Section Nine!" he retorted breathlessly.

"Damn him!" Voshchin exploded. "Trust those transport fellows to bungle things. I suppose I'll have to go and see to it myself."

"Never mind," Rogov said "I'll attend to it—I have to go that way in any case."

. But it turned out to be harder to straighten out the hitch than he had thought. There were a few empties in the cross-gallery, but they had all been coupled to an electric locomotive and were about to be sent off.

"Can't be done," the transport foreman was firm. "My orders are to take care of District Three first."

"But Voshchin's driving a high-speed heading and he must have first call on empties," Rogov insisted.

"You leave these trams alone," the foreman raised his voice. "I'd advise you to push off!"

Rogov felt as he had so many times before in the heat of an attack at the front when he would act first and think afterwards. He leapt in front of the electric locomotive and signing to Dimka with his lamp ordered him to uncouple three of the empty trams. The foreman started down the gallery but stopped at Rogov's peremptory "Stay where you are!"

Dimka unhitched the trams, turned them around on the turntable and pushed them into a drift branching off from the cross-gallery.

The girl driver who had been gazing at Rogov with admiration from the cab, gave a deafening peal of the signal bell and the locomotive rolled into the dark tunnel of the cross-gallery with the remainder of the trams while the foreman stood by speechless with surprise and indignation.

As his anger subsided, misgivings began to assail Rogov for having allowed a minor matter like the lack of three trams to upset his equilibrium. But then a feeling of uplift overwhelmed him: the ice had been broken, and the best men in the pit had set out to accomplish big things. His speech at the conference, the sleepless nights

he had spent drawing up work schedules, the effort he had put into scraping up mechanical equipment wherever he could, had not been in vain.

Rogov entered Bondarchuk's office in the best of spirits.

CHAPTER XII

The Communists at the mine were not soon to forget that meeting at which they had made the acquaintance of the new Party organizer and elected him to the Bureau. Later on they spoke of it as the "turning point."

After the voting, Drobot had taken the floor. He made a brief, patronizing speech in which he paternally advised the new Party organizer to concern himself primarily with plan fulfilment.

"Coal output will be the gauge for judging your work! You're new to the mine and you might find things a bit strange at first." Drobot turned to face Bondarchuk. "Please don't hesitate to come to me any time, I'll do my best to assist you. The important thing is to tackle the job boldly. You'll find it won't take you much more than a couple of weeks to get your bearings."

Then the Party organizer got up to speak. The meeting had already had a good look at him while he was giving an account of his past activities. He was of medium height, with an erect military bearing, and his clothes fitted him well. He had a large well-shaped head, a near-olive complexion and dark eyes that were thoughtful and very calm. Yet looking into those eyes you felt that their owner was capable at any moment of firing some disconcerting question at you that you would be at a loss to answer.

"I thank you for your warm welcome," said Bondarchuk with a fleeting smile that touched his lips only. "I'm afraid, though, you're being far too indulgent in giving me two whole weeks to get my bearings. I have been here four days already." He surveyed the meeting and spread his hands to include all present. "See how many there are of us—one hundred and sixty-eight Party members—that is quite a force, comrades. But there's one thing that bothers me. . . . It appears that only half of you are actually working in the mine. As for the rest. . . ."

"The rest are working on the surface to keep up the flow of coal," Drobot put in emphatically, rapping his fingers on the table.

Bondarchuk paid no heed to the interruption.

"The rest," he went on, "are keeping up the flow of coal on the surface. But, comrades, isn't the mine, the face, the best place to do that? What do you think?"

The meeting had been expecting something like this for some time now.

"Are you implying that the Communists ran away from the pit, Comrade Bondarchuk?" someone shouted.

A steely glint appeared for a moment in the Party organizer's eyes. He squared his shoulders and his knuckles dropped sharply against the table.

"I did not say that, nor have I any right to say it! Once the Communists are working on the surface I presume they are there by decision of the Party organization."

"Right," Drobot nodded.

"And if so, I would say that it is urgently necessary to take an immediate decision to strengthen the Party groups underground by returning the Communists to the pit. I move accordingly."

From the formalities of introduction, the meeting had switched sharply to current mine affairs. However much Drobot insisted that it was too soon to adopt such an important decision, that the Party organizer simply did not know the actual state of affairs, when Bondarchuk's motion was put to the vote it was carried. He himself took that as a matter of course.

"And now, comrades," he said, surveying the meeting with his calm, imperturbable gaze, "please don't hesitate to call me up or drop in to see me at any time."

After that meeting hardly a day passed that Rogov did not pay a visit to the Party organizer. Today he came not because there was some urgent problem to decide, but simply for a breath of fresh air, as he told himself.

The Party Bureau's little office was crowded. There was a low hum of voices, the telephone jangled at frequent intervals, and over at the window two men were engaged in earnest conversation.

"Now answer my question: is he a Communist or isn't he?" Rogov heard one of them say. "Then why can't he arrange his life as a Communist should? Have we the right to speak to him about it? Of course we have! And we've got to take it up with him."

Dubintsev was sitting opposite Bondarchuk and diligently jotting down notes on a pad, pausing every now and then to look at the sun-flooded window with a concentrated expression.

Nodding his greeting to Rogov, Bondarchuk turned back to Dubintsev.

"I am glad that your Party group elected you their organizer," Bondarchuk was saying, tracing some figure on the desk top with a finger nail as was his habit. "Very glad indeed."

"It was a complete surprise to me, Victor Petrovich," Dubintsev's light eyebrows lifted. "The last thing I expected."

Bondarchuk smiled.

"Well, it's just as well not to take things for granted—it's good to be always a little amazed at the wonders of the life you are building," he said. "You must always remember that a Party worker is a captain of men—moreover, a captain who must primarily seek to mould the minds of men, to make them stronger, finer. See that? To begin with, I'd like to ask you to pay particular attention to Alexeyev. Somehow he does not seem to get along so well in his work. Find out what help he might need, see whether he is studying. Take an interest in him, as a member of the Communist Party should. Then there's another matter: comparatively few of the miners in your section subscribe to newspapers...."

"Now that's a simple matter," Dubintsev shrugged his shoulders. "Give me a day and everything will be in order."

"Not so fast," a slight frown appeared on the Party organizer's face. "I brought this up because it is not such a simple matter. You must also find out what people are particularly interested in. Remember Nadya Knysh, the third-shift traction motor driver? Now, she comes in every day and looks through the papers for musical items. Have you noticed what a melodious voice she has? You should keep her in mind too—perhaps she ought to get instruction in singing. Or take propman Sergei Kopylov—he's started a clipping file of articles on world affairs. So you see advising someone about subscribing to one or another newspaper is not such a petty matter, but an important Party duty."

Bondarchuk rose and extended his hand to Dubintsev. "Well, group organizer, carry on," he said in conclusion. "There's a great deal of pressing work ahead of you. And don't forget to drop in to see me as often as you can."

Dubintsev's place was taken by an elderly stoutish man with a large fleshy face and tightly compressed lips. Beside him stood a tall girl with a round face, saucy turned-up nose and a pair of large dancing eyes so full of mirth that one could not look at them without smiling.

"What can I do for you?" Bondarchuk asked. He glanced from the man to the girl, and bent over the table quickly to keep from laughing.

"I've come to you for help, Comrade Bondarchuk," said the man with an angry glance at the girl. "My name's Zubov, and this is my niece. A typical disorganizer."

"Now then, Uncle Vasya!" said the girl, laying her hand on the shoulder of her ill-humoured relative.

"You keep quiet, please," growled Uncle Vasya. "I'm the house manager of youth hostel No. 8," he went on, turning back to Bondarchuk. "You know, the two-story building by the hill. And I also give lectures now and again on current topics under the auspices of the Party education centre."

"Three talks a week, and all in our dormitory," interjected the girl, studying the Party organizer's face with interest.

"Yes, three talks a week," confirmed Zubov. "What's wrong with that? Now my talk on world affairs yesterday was interrupted. And you know who did it? My own niece here. She was the first to start the rumpus...."

"The first?" echoed Bondarchuk. "Then there were others?"

"Of course there were!" the girl admitted

"And what exactly started the . . . er . . . rumpus? But first tell me what is your name?"

"Lena. I didn't make a rumpus at all, I just said out loud. . . ."

"What did you say?"

"That's right," Zubov broke in. "Let her tell you what she said, just when I was getting into my stride too . . ."

Lena lowered her eyes and a slight flush rose to her cheeks.

"I . . . I said," she hesitated for a moment, then blurted out: "I said the lecture wasn't any good."

"That's it! That's what she said!" Uncle Vasya almost shouted.

Bondarchuk raised a finger.

"One moment, Comrade Zubov. Tell me, Lena, why wasn't it any good?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"Because it was as dull as ditchwater!"

Zubov smiled ironically

"They would rather listen to the accordion, of course," he remarked.

"That's not true," the girl protested hotly. "Look," she said, appealing to Bondarchuk. "Uncle was talking about the United Nations, about the way the imperialists are carrying on there, and then about how the colonialists are making life impossible for the people of Viet-Nam. And he spoke about Greece as well. So I asked him whether there were any Komsomol members in Viet-Nam and he said he didn't have the exact data at the moment. Then Sonya Ryzhkova asked where the Viet-Nam republic was, what sort of people lived there and whether we couldn't write a nice letter to them telling them how sorry we are for them.

"And so Uncle got angry. He said he hadn't been there and that he had enough to do as it was, and that the post office was the place to inquire about letters." Lena sighed. "After that we lost interest, and when Uncle read a long article out of the newspaper, we began whispering. But that was way at the back. . . ."

"You see?" Zubov said to the Party organizer. "Something must be done about it, Comrade Bondarchuk. Such an attitude to serious lectures cannot be tolerated."

Suppressing a smile, Bondarchuk rubbed his nose vigorously, but he could not help laughing finally. "Well, Lena," he said, "you have given me a new kind of problem, I must say. I really don't know what to say. Let us try and think of some solution together, shall we?"

The girl nodded eagerly.

Bondarchuk leaned forward and, searching her face gravely, asked:

"Suppose you yourself had to deliver a talk, do you think it would be dull?"

Lena did not seem the least bit surprised by the question. She paused to consider for a moment before replying. Then she shook her head vigorously.

"No, Victor Petrovich. I'm quite sure it would not be dull. Especially if it was about Greece. It makes my blood boil to think of what's happening there!"

Bondarchuk leaned across the table and pressed the girl's hand. "I know how you feel, Lena, and don't ever let yourself cool off about such things. You really ought to prepare a lecture. Come in to see me tomorrow evening at eight and we'll talk it over. Will you?"

"Yes, but. . ." this time Lena looked up timidly at the Party organizer. "But I have never delivered a talk

before. Perhaps I'd better just tell the girls what I know and how I feel about it."

"But that's just what is wanted!" Bondarchuk exclaimed. He shook hands with Lena and her uncle who was clearly displeased with the turn the conversation had taken, and when they went out he straightened his shoulders with obvious pleasure and turned to Rogov. "Did you hear that? Wonderful, wasn't it! And now sit down over here and tell me how you're getting along. Ah, I can see by your face that everything is going fine. Satisfied? Nekrasov and Voshchin did not let you down? But don't forget this is only the first little step "

Bondarchuk spoke gaily, but Rogov felt that the Party organizer had something else on his mind. In general he admired Bondarchuk for his ability to give correct guidance when it was needed most. Rogov was conscious that his own fiery temperament sometimes prevented him from expressing himself as lucidly and compellingly as he would have wished.

Rogov knew that Bondarchuk always had his own definite opinion about things and that he would stick firmly to that opinion.

"Now tell me about that newspaper business," the Party organizer said.

"Generally speaking, it was an amusing business," Rogov replied. "I think Nekrasov's fellows made it rather hot for the writer of that item."

"Amusing, you say? And who was most amused?"

"At any rate not Nekrasov."

"I thought so. What about that matter of empties for Voshchin's heading?"

Rogov remembered his tilt with the trams and laughed in spite of himself.

"Another amusing story?" Bondarchuk smiled. Then his eyes narrowed and he went on: "I personally am not in the mood for laughter at this particular point. I'm afraid I can't share your good spirits."

The telephone rang and the Party organizer got up to answer it.

"Comrade Khomyakov?" he spoke into the receiver. "How is your arithmetic coming along? Too long a story to be told over the telephone? Well, come over then, I'll be waiting for you."

Shortly afterward Khomyakov entered, breathing hard.

"Ran like the devil," he panted, and paused to catch his breath. "I have some news about that arithmetic problem of ours," he went on with a wry smile. "A commission came down from the head office and went over the coal piles. They said there was nothing wrong with my arithmetic; what had to be cleared up was where the missing coal had gone to."

Rogov winced as if the blow had been directed personally against him.

"The scoundrels!" he burst out, though as yet he did not know who exactly the scoundrels were. "Whom do they think they are swindling?"

Bondarchuk looked searchingly at Rogov and traced something on the desk top with a finger nail.

"I thought it might amuse you," he said significantly. "For it is also a rather funny story. Think of it, thousands of tons of coal vanishing into thin air—coal the state has paid for and for which premiums have been distributed." He stood up abruptly and, extending his hand to the engineer, brought the conversation to a close. "I believe you'd better go now—if I'm not mistaken, the management wants to see you."

Rogov met Annushka in Drobot's outer office. They were glad to see each other and stopped to talk about the time they had been to the pictures together.

"I chanced to see how you finished up that moonlight night..." Rogov remarked with a sly smile. "Surely you haven't forgotten? The little garden in front of the house, the silvery light on the poplars and a young athlete saying to his girl: 'If you only knew, Annushka. . .'"

"Oh, how could you!" Annushka cried, flushing scarlet.

"When is the wedding to be?"

"That's what I've been waiting to see you about. Come next Sunday at six o'clock. Kolya hadn't the courage to invite you. He's awfully shy, you know!" Annushka's eyes lit up with maternal tenderness.

"Shy?" Rogov echoed in surprise. "I would never have believed it from the way he behaves down there in the pit. Goes at it like a real soldier."

"Oh, but he really is shy!" Annushka said with a little frown.

"No doubt, no doubt," Rogov hastened to agree, and still smiling, he pricked up his ears suddenly as Starodubtsev's voice raised in anger sounded through the closed door.

"He's a demagogue and a troublemaker! The matter will have to be taken up at once by the Party Bureau. I'll see that it is!"

Someone, Filenkov evidently, boomed something inaudible in reply.

"This last incident with trams is an outrage," Starodubtsev was speaking again. "I must ask you to choose between us—it's either me or him!"

Rogov flung open the door and walked in.

"I'm busy!" said Drobot, raising his hand.

"So am I! You told me to come at three. It's exactly three now."

Rogov seated himself and placed his battery lamp on his knees, his whole manner seeming to say: "All right, go ahead!"

There followed several moments of tense silence. Rogov looked Drobot straight in the eyes, barely suppressing the impulse to shout: "Coward! Why don't you speak?" Drobot dropped his eyes.

"We've received the invoices for scraper transporters," he said after a pause. "We could begin installing them."

"I'll do that right away!" Rogov said with a sigh of relief.

"Er yes . . . But, I'm afraid, someone else will have to do it."

"Someone else? I don't understand. . . ." Rogov passed his hand over his face. Pity he hadn't had time to shave.

Drobot shrugged his shoulders.

"There isn't much to understand. Just had word from the trust that you're being transferred to Pit No. 10 as assistant to the chief engineer. Ocheredko is to replace you here temporarily. He has plenty of experience in practical mining. So you'll have to go and report to the trust at once for your new appointment."

"Impossible!" Rogov's fingers gripped his battery lamp so tightly that it hurt. Watching the bluish tinge spread under his nails he said calmly: "Of course, everything is possible . . . I suppose Ocheredko will be district engineer too since Drobot wishes it. Although you might just as well appoint some Egyptian pyramid as district engineer. . . . There's only one thing that's out of the question and that is my leaving the pit! Is that clear? I cannot go, especially now with the transporters coming and

high-speed drift-driving just getting under way. . . . Surely you see that I can't possibly leave now?"

Starodubtsev stole a glance at him and was startled in spite of himself to see how pale Rogov had gone. But perhaps he had been mistaken, for when he looked again a moment later the engineer's cheeks were burning.

"I am very sorry," Drobot remarked, lifting one shoulder and burying his nose in his papers. "Very sorry indeed, but such things are decided in the trust."

"Just a minute," Starodubtsev intervened. "It seems to me, Pavel Gordeyevich," he said turning to address Rogov, "that we may be able to understand one another if we are frank about it."

Rogov said nothing. Drobot was about to reach for the telephone but changed his mind. Filenkov stood motionless by the window tense with expectation.

"I want to be quite frank about all this," Starodubtsev went on, "and I don't think such frankness is out of place because over at Pit No. 10 you will also have to deal with people who are neither better nor worse than ourselves. You're mistaken, if you regard men like Drobot and myself as conservative, slaves of routine. In the first place, that is far too elementary, and secondly. . . ."

This time Rogov laughed.

"What's this, a continuation of the Stakhanovite meeting or is it just an additional commentary to what I said there?"

"It isn't a commentary, and there isn't anything amusing about it," Drobot cut in dryly.

"Good!" Compressing his lips, Rogov tore a leaf from the notebook on the desk, scribbled a few words on it, and handed it to Drobot. "I'm asking for ten days' leave. I am entitled to it. I'll hand over the district today. But, mind,

I'm not leaving the pit. Get me? I'm not leaving!" With that he walked quickly out of the office.

Annushka, still waiting in the outer office, met Rogov with a friendly glance.

"So there's going to be a wedding, eh, Annushka?" he asked, noting with surprise how different his voice sounded. "A wedding. Nice things, weddings! I'll be there for certain."

"Pavel Gordeyevich!" Annushka had either overheard the talk in the inner office or else she saw by Rogov's face that something unpleasant had occurred, for she took a step toward him. "Pavel Gordeyevich, will you come and see us afterwards too?" She inquired anxiously.

Rogov emerged from the office building just as the orange orb of the evening sun touched the distant purple hills. He was suddenly and inexplicably conscious of an extraordinary sensation of lightness in his whole body, and his head felt unusually fresh and clear. He had not felt like this for a long time—not since the war. There, at the front, he usually experienced this sensation when operational orders put an end to a long period of wearisome suspense. That happened just before attacks.

Several miners were sitting on the edge of the pavement; they had obviously just come up from the pit. As Rogov walked past he heard one of the men remark:

"He's a fighter."

Rogov smiled to himself. A fighter indeed! Then he bumped into Chernov.

"Ah, our reporter!" Rogov said gaily. "How did you get along with the miners?"

"I want to thank you, Pavel Gordeyevich," Chernov blushed like a boy, "honest I do! Nekrasov's fellows are

wonderful. I spent half a shift with them at the face. You see, I want to write a feature story about them."

"What did I tell you?" Rogov said. "I have another good subject for you: Cherepanov's crew. Only you've got to make it exciting to do justice to them. But first tell me this: What induced you to write that item about Nekrasov's crew?"

"The department head called me in and said that Comrade Drobot had phoned and given the facts. He wanted me to write it up and so I did. There was no time to take a trip to the pit to check up. And since the information came straight from the chief there seemed no need for it."

"And you didn't even bother to take a look at the people you attacked?"

Chernov averted his eyes for a moment, then gripped Rogov's elbow.

"It won't happen again, Pavel Gordeyevich!"

"I can hardly take your word for it," Rogov shook his head. "But if you'll visit the pit more often, see people and write about them and their doings. . . ."

"I'll even write verse about them!" the young man cried, gazing at the engineer with admiration. "I have heard a great deal about you today, Pavel Gordeyevich. . . . Nekrasov took me by the scruff of the neck like a puppy that had misbehaved and showed me how things were being done in the district. And all the time he kept on saying: 'That's Rogov's work. It's Rogov who helped us put this through. . . .'"

Rogov made a deprecatory gesture.

"You're running away with yourself again! It's not me, but men like Nekrasov, Voshchin and Cherepanov you've got to watch."

They walked away from the pithead through the narrow meandering paths of the stadium. A volleyball team was practising at the courts; you could hear the dull thumping of the ball and the brief shouts of the players.

Gradually the gathering dusk coloured the landscape around them in bluish tints.

"You ought to have heard the things they told me!" Chernov exclaimed again, emitting a low whistle.

CHAPTER XIII

Rogov liked Chernov's article on the history of the coal field, and he jotted down a few facts from it for use in the report he was preparing on the pit's five-year plan. After that he looked through a recent issue of a literary magazine. Then he unfolded the drawings for the development of a new field and hastily folded them up again. All his efforts to appear composed were unavailing. Yet what was there so upsetting about being transferred to another pit? After all, similar things happened to dozens of engineers; many of them indeed welcomed the opportunity for a change of scene. At the same time he could not believe, he did not want to believe, that someone actually had the power to tear him away from his work just when he had got things moving. He telephoned down to the pit and asked how the shift was making out in the various sections of the district.

"I've reported the hourly output figures to district engineer Ocheredko," was the reply. There was a click in the receiver as the other end hung up.

Rogov laughed mirthlessly and set to pacing up and down the room. After a while he picked Valya's photograph off the wall and placed it on the desk, sat down in

front of it and stared at it for a long while, his chin cupped in his hand.

"That's all right, Valya," he said finally, "don't you imagine I'm giving up the ghost. It's just that I miss you, dear, miss you awfully."

The telephone rang. He picked up the receiver and heard Bondarchuk's voice.

"How are you?" the Party organizer inquired. "Quite all right? You mean it? Well, that's fine. I was detained at a City Committee Bureau meeting and I didn't hear about the trust's extremely hasty decision until late. But you needn't take all that seriously, you know. About that matter of the shortage in the piles, you see how one thing leads to another? How in the world can people do such things? The City Committee has taken action. As for you, carry on as before. Is that clear? Good. By the way, I'm leaving tonight for the coal field administration. I'll be gone a couple of days. I suppose they knew about you in the personnel department there. Good-bye."

The receiver clicked and the girl operator inquired "Have you finished?"

"Yes, thank you!" Rogov exclaimed. He dropped the receiver on to the hook and sprang to his feet. "Thank goodness for Bondarchuk, for Valya, and all the comrades!"

His momentary sense of loneliness seemed almost ridiculous now. Loneliness? Nonsense! Why, only last evening he had had three visitors—Khmelchenko, Nekrasov and Voshchin. They had sat down side by side on the little sofa and asked for permission to smoke. They had behaved as if nothing had happened, while Rogov on his part had been careful not to show how deeply touched he was by this visit, although he knew very well what had prompted it

"We've just been to see the secretary of the City Committee," Khmelchenko announced. "Had a nice chat with him."

"Very nice chat," Voshchin put in.

Rogov did not ask what they had talked about at the City Committee. Instead he asked Nekrasov, who was the monitor of the courses for mine foremen, to put off the class he was to teach tomorrow.

"Why?" Nekrasov wanted to know.

"Oh, I've got all sorts of things to attend to."

Nekrasov dropped his gaze to his small round palm, then looked up at his comrades. And when he met Rogov's eyes again his face was unsmiling, almost stern.

"That's too bad, Pavel Gordeyevich," he said dryly. "We oughtn't to put off things. As a matter of fact, we had something else in mind. We wanted you to deliver a lecture, or just a talk, tomorrow about the production cycle. All three brigades are getting together. It would be good for the men to get a proper grasp of the idea. . ."

"We thought we'd ask Cherepanov and his lads to come too," Khmelchenko interposed.

As he recalled that talk now, Rogov got up and walked quickly across the room, plugged in the electric stove, put on the kettle, produced an unopened bottle of brandy from the cupboard and poured out a glass. He thought he caught a sly twinkle in Valya's eyes as she smiled at him from her picture.

"Don't judge me too harshly, dear," Rogov said raising his glass, "I'm only drinking to your health. . ."

But before he had time to put the glass to his lips, he heard a faint noise in the hallway as of someone groping in the darkness for the door handle. Then came two gentle taps Rogov opened the door. In the gloom of the

hallway he made out the figure of a man in army uniform.

"Come in!" Rogov invited.

The man stood still as if afraid to cross the threshold.

"Come in, come in!" Rogov repeated.

The man stepped forward and halted in the doorway, his arms held stiffly at his sides. Before he realized what all this meant, before even he had heard the stranger's voice, Rogov felt the blood rush in a hot wave to his face.

"Guards Sergeant?"

"Right you are, Comrade Guards Captain!" the lad's eyes fairly danced, but he stood still more stiffly at attention as he rapped out in crisp military fashion: "Permit me to report, Comrade Guards Captain. We made it! Berlin got it hot!"

Rogov made an impulsive movement forward and opened his arms.

"Welcome, soldier! What on earth are you doing here?"

"Comrade Guards Captain!" cried the young sergeant, and the tears rolled unheeded down his cheeks.

Rogov too felt a hot lump rise in his throat, but he laughed.

"Forget about the title, Stepan. . . My name's Pavel."

"I'm not used to that. . ."

They exchanged a bone-cracking bear's hug, then studied each other at arm's length and embraced again. Danilov, his forehead pressed touchingly, brotherlike, against Rogov's shoulder, confessed in a muffled voice:

"All the way here I thought to myself: must drop in and see what he's like now. He was a great chap . . . a terror!"

"Haven't forgotten?"

"I'll never forget as long as I live!"

"Look, something must have told me you were coming," said Rogov, leading Danilov to the table. "See, one glass is ready for action, and we'll load the other in a jiffy."

"Remember Poznan?"

"And Zgierz?"

"Remember how Sergeant Chistyakov cooked potatoes on dynamite?"

"And that . . . what was his name? You know, the one who refused to eat captured food?"

"Gulevich. He was killed."

"Yes, a great many never came back. " Rogov said sadly moving Valya's picture on the desk.

"Your girl?" Danilov asked indicating the portrait with his eyes.

Rogov smiled.

"Now then, let's drink to our meeting, to your return!"

"To life, Comrade Guards Captain!"

They sat up most of the night, their chairs drawn close together, discussing a host of topics, exchanging endless reminiscences.

"How did you dig me out that time? I never did find out," Danilov reminded himself somewhere around dawn. "You got yours the very next day. . . ."

"The devil knows! I only remember the huge crater, and how I dug all the way round it and suddenly saw that familiar mess tin of yours sticking out. Something about it told me my sniper was alive."

"But you didn't take such good care of yourself," Daniloⁿilov chided him.

"Couldn't help that. It was only about one and a half kilometres to the Seelow hills, and only a stone's throw from there to Berlin. . . . But what would you have said, Stepan," Rogov said, suddenly changing the subject, "what would you have said, if at that very moment I had been removed from the command?"

"That couldn't have happened to you," Daniloⁿilov replied without a moment's hesitation, "and if it was anyone else, I'd either say nothing or I'd say they'd probably done right to remove him."

Rogov laughed.

"Smart lad!"

Towards morning the sergeant was quite tipsy from weariness and brandy.

"Well, and what are your plans for the future?" Rogov asked him.

Daniloⁿilov waved away the question.

"I'm a bit vague about the future, Comrade Guards Captain," he answered thickly. "I'd like best of all to be in your command again, but when it comes to mining, I'm dashed if I know. . . ."

CHAPTER XIV

Daniloⁿilov awoke to find himself on the sofa covered by a freshly laundered linen sheet. There was no sign of Rogov. The sergeant got up and wrote a note. He spent a long time over it. Chuckling to himself, he entitled it: "Explanatory Message."

"Please excuse me if I said anything I shouldn't have last night," he wrote in an uncertain schoolboy hand.

"All sorts of ideas are buzzing in my head. The war is over and I can't help thinking about the future. At the front I was a sniper and a scout—both very important professions. But I wouldn't like to be missing any of the big doings now that peace is here. If you can spare the time, I'd like you to give me some advice, Comrade Guards Captain."

After that he picked up the photograph of the fair-haired girl with the large eyes and subjected it to a prolonged and definitely biased scrutiny and ended up by turning the picture face to the wall with the disgruntled comment: "Too fancy for my liking."

It was not until then that he noticed Rogov's note lying conspicuously by the mirror. "Do not withdraw from your positions without further orders," he read. "Rations are in cupboard. Bed and bedding will be sent in from the mine. Dig in and await further instructions."

Danilov looked about him and took stock of his surroundings for the first time since his arrival. His eye travelled over the narrow iron cot, the desk, the small table with the radio on it, the mirror on the wall, another small table in the corner with the electric stove and kettle, three chairs, a sofa, a large window and a glass door leading to a balcony. Not a bad position to hold on to at that, he thought; but even in his sleep Danilov had been conscious of a vague restlessness, as if someone had been urging him to throw open the door and hurry out into the golden September sunshine.

He went out on the balcony. The freshness of the frosty morning air made his face tingle. The sun was coming up on the other side of the house, and hoar frost still covered the iron railing. Nearby, mine structures loomed up out of a deep hollow—the first colliery headgear

Danilov had ever seen at such close range. "So that's what they look like," he thought.

Just then the balcony door of the next apartment opened and a dark girl in a bright-coloured dressing gown stepped out, her face still flushed from sleep. Seeing Danilov she frowned as if she had caught him at some misdemeanour. Smiling inwardly the sergeant bowed to her with exaggerated politeness.

"A neighbour, I presume?"

"Not that I know of," the girl replied coldly, but then she looked again at the stocky soldier with the flaxen tuft of hair sticking up over his temple, noticed the Gold Star on his tunic and smiled. It was Olenka Pozdnyakova, Khomyakov's niece.

Gradually they got to talking. Before he knew it Danilov was telling her how he had found Rogov again, and how they had been too excited to think of sleeping and had spent the night "discussing the world situation," which was a slight exaggeration, to put it mildly. Finally he asked her whether she knew Tonya Lipilina, awaiting her reply with an excitement he could barely conceal.

"Tonya Lipilina? The girl who was wounded at the front? No, I don't know her personally, but I've heard a lot about her. There was something about her in the papers too."

Between them stood a barrel, a packing case and a pail full of lime. Danilov negotiated the barrier in one leap—he hardly knew himself how he got on the other side. The girl stepped back in fright; for a moment she thought the soldier had lost his senses, but then she recovered herself, and with true feminine tact pretended not to have noticed the sergeant's impulsive leap or how his

face paled and his eyes flashed as he asked in a hoarse whisper:

"Tonya! . . . Do you know her address?"

No, she did not know Tonya's address, but if the comrade would be home she could find out and telephone it to him as soon as she got to the newspaper office where she worked as a stenographer.

Touching Danilov lightly on the sleeve, Olenka went inside with a prim good-bye. She had quite forgotten what she had gone onto the balcony for, but was secretly elated at the thought that today she would be able to surprise Sasha Chernov with the sensational news that a Hero of the Soviet Union had arrived next door. Chernov was rather a nice boy on the whole, but he invariably managed to be far better informed than she about events in the world generally and at the mine in particular.

"Oh, is that all!" he would say whenever she came to him breathless with some exciting news. "I knew all about that yesterday!"

Whether Olenka managed to scoop Sasha Chernov this time or not is unknown, but some two hours later there was a peremptory knock at Danilov's door. A tall young man with a round head, a round beaming face and amazingly light eyes stood on the threshold. He inquired whether he had the honour of addressing Hero of the Soviet Union Danilov and on receiving an affirmative but none too cordial reply, announced with professional glibness that he was Chernov of the local newspaper and that he had been given an assignment to interview Comrade Danilov. His paper wanted to know what Comrade Danilov thought of the town and whether Comrade Danilov intended staying on at the mine or whether he had other plans.

"I haven't any plans at all so far," Danilov admitted frankly and Chernov smiled understandingly.

"Tell me, Comrade Hero of the Soviet Union . . ."

"Stepan Georgievich will do."

"Tell me, Stepan Georgievich, hasn't engineer Rogov given you any news about the mine yet? He hasn't told you about Cherepanov's Komsomol brigade by any chance, has he?"

"Of course Captain Rogov has told me a great deal about the mine, but I don't seem to remember anything about Cherepanov."

"So he hasn't mentioned it," Chernov said to himself. "That means I'd better not mention it either."

"Listen, comrade reporter," Danilov said interrupting his thoughts. "Do you happen to have a little dark-haired girl working in your office? Olenka is her name."

"Yes, we have. What about her?" Chernov pricked up his ears.

"Oh, nothing much. She's very obliging, isn't she? You see, I know very few people around here. I just met her today. A nice girl."

"Hm, so that's it!" Chernov commented to himself in some surprise. "That's why she was so sweet to me today! Called me 'Sasha dear!' Oh, those women!"

The two men talked for the better part of an hour. Danilov, who had spent some time in Germany after the defeat of the fascists, told Chernov how the previous June, shortly after victory, he had gone to Thuringia just after the Americans had withdrawn from there.

"I hear the American capitalists are being damn polite to the fascists?" Chernov remarked with a wry smile.

"Yes, amazingly polite," Danilov replied with a short

laugh. Then almost at once he inquired: "This Olenka is quite reliable, I suppose?"

"Reliable?"

"I mean to say, does she keep her promises?"

But before Chernov had time to answer, the telephone rang.

"Hullo. Yes, yes, it's me!" Danilov grabbed the receiver with both hands. "What's that? Say it again. . . . Green Hollow? Number one hundred and thirty? Thank you very much indeed!"

He hung up the receiver and said in a tone of deep conviction:

"Good girl, Olenka. Reliable. Well, comrade reporter, let's go. I have a visit to make. . . ."

. . . The sun had come out and only on the shady side of the roofs a few dark patches of melting hoar frost still remained. The mining town ran in a narrow strip from the banks of the river towards the tall green hills in the east.

A few birches were scattered over the hillsides and above them spread the transparent blue sky. The broad main street was crowded. Lusty-voiced children were romping in the autumn-gold gardens.

Chernov pointed out the newspaper office and invited Danilov to drop in, adding magnanimously that he could find Olenka Pozdnyakova there between twelve to eight. Danilov nodded his thanks absently and strode on. Sharp gusts of wind stirred the evening air. Danilov quickened his pace, but he could not go fast enough. Out of a deep ditch by the railway crossing three grimy little faces stared out at him. Danilov shook a finger at them as one of them cried out in triumph:

"Mityail Vanya! Look, a Hero!"

But here was Green Hollow Street at last. Why "hollow," he wondered as he surveyed the broad straight street lined with neat little cottages fronted by tiny gardens and vegetable plots in between. True, it began in a hollow, but then it climbed uphill. The bitterish smell of smoke wafted by the breeze from the vegetable gardens reminded him somehow of his childhood. Danilov's trained eye took in everything; the broad view of the mine that opened up from the middle of the street, and the sky which seemed even deeper and brighter from the hill. But for some reason he shrank from glancing up at the number on the corner house. Suppose it was No. 130 and someone was already peeping at him through the window and wondering whether he would turn in at the wicket gate

But no, it was only No. 71; No. 130 would be farther up the road on the right hand side. One block, another, and there it was. An ordinary house. Nothing remarkable about it. Yet now he knew that the moment had come, the moment he had waited for so long. He walked up two well-scoured steps and inside the entrance. Several skinny-legged chickens came running toward him. In the semidarkness he saw some birch brooms, bunches of golden onions, and red jolly-looking clusters of elder berries hanging from hooks. There was a strong smell of mint. Two yellowish-green pumpkins lay on a bench and beside them stood a pail filled with water so clear that it was all but invisible. At the sight of it Danilov realized that his throat was parched, and he bent down and put his lips to the rim of the pail and drank.

"There's a mug for that purpose, young man," he heard a deep woman's voice behind him.

"Excuse me. . ." In his confusion Danilov hastily

wiped his lips with his sleeve, removed his trench cap and said huskily:

"I've come to see Tonya Lipilina. . . ."

The woman regarded him gravely and said nothing. For some reason Danilov was conscious only of her stern, accusing eyes, although afterwards he could have described her appearance in every detail—the strong, stately figure, the proud carriage, the long, youthful face with the dry, tightly compressed lips and the dark eyebrows arched under the faded kerchief—all so strangely familiar though he had never seen her before.

To Danilov who had lost his parents at an early age, this woman seemed the very embodiment of that sacred word "mother" which had always meant so much to him, and he felt irresistibly drawn to her in spite of her chill reception.

"Whom do you want?" she inquired again coldly.

"Who is it, mother?" a weak voice asked from the inner room.

The awkward smile froze on his lips; he brushed past the woman, went through a small kitchen, moved aside the light curtain over the door of the inner room and with the same curious smile on his face, halted irresolutely in the doorway.

Tonya lay under a pale blue blanket, her head half raised from the crumpled pillows, an air of tense expectation conveyed not so much by her face as by the whole attitude of her frail little body. Her left eyebrow twitched faintly, but she did not open her eyes and the eyelids were so transparent that he could see the blue veins. Her slender hand moved restlessly over the blanket and then paused for a moment. Suddenly in a calm, quiet voice she said:

"Is it you, Stepan?"

He ran over and sat down on the edge of the bed, took her cool little hands in his and pressing them to his weather-beaten cheeks, swayed slowly from side to side. And swaying thus, he listened to the voice he had travelled so many thousands of miles to hear.

"I knew you would come," she said. "I thought of you all the time. . . . And I always saw in my dreams those two little aspen trees in your sector and that silent German tank . . . and I saw you too. But I am ill, Stepa. I am only just out of hospital after my second operation. And now my eyes have gone bad. They say I will be able to see after a while. I do so wish I could see you now. . . . But now I know everything is going to be all right."

Danilov released the girl's hands and listened in silence, trying to control his breathing.

"But you haven't said anything yet." Tonya's hand slid restlessly over the blanket and paused on a patch of sunshine, then rose to touch Danilov's chest and face. "Say something, Stepa."

"What shall I say?" He pressed his lips to her warm cheek. "What shall I say to you, my darling, my little white dove? I have come back to you, come back to stay. . . ."

. . . When he left her the sun had already dropped low and shone dimly through a milky haze.

He came home to find that a second cot had been put up. On the table lay another note from Rogov: "Your sightseeing tour approved. Afraid I'll be detained at the mine tonight. Greetings. Your captain."

CHAPTER XV

The rivalry between Mikhail Cherepanov and Sevastyan Yemelyanov dated all the way back to their childhood. Neither of them knew how it had started or bothered to discover what had caused it. In time they came to take it for granted.

"What can I do if he won't let anyone get the better of him?" one would say of the other. "That's the way he's made."

And even after they had grown up and become lanky adolescents, with voices that wobbled precariously between treble and bass, neither would permit himself to be outdone by the other in anything. In the contest for excellent marks in school they both were in the lead, in skiing they both excelled, in dancing it was difficult to say which was the better.

Once, during the summer holidays they happened to meet at the river, and to settle an argument as to which of them could remain under water the longest, they dived in. This particular contest might have ended tragically had some elderly citizen who had been sunning himself on the beach not dragged them both out of the water by the hair.

The year before they left school they both fell in love with a classmate. Her name was Lyubochka, a quiet, shy little thing, positively terrified of her two admirers. It never occurred to the rivals, however, to bother about Lyubochka's feelings towards them. They usually escorted her home after school, following her at a distance of a hundred yards or so, Mikhail on one side of the street, Sevastyan on the other.

Finally the last term drew to a close. On graduation day, after the solemn session which is so moving and

uplifting for all young people finishing school, Sevastyan and Mikhail met in the corridor. Both had just been presented with graduation diplomas and honour certificates with exactly the same number of excellent marks. They bumped into each other quite by chance, before either had time to compose his features into the proper expression. They looked at each other rather coldly

"We'll be seeing each other yet," said Mikhail.

"We certainly will," Sevastyan returned, and on his way downstairs threw over his shoulder: "By the way, my dad writes that he's been decorated with the Order of the Red Star."

"What a coincidence," said Mikhail in surprise. "So's mine."

He walked down the corridor, pulled open the glass door and stepped out onto the balcony. Behind him he heard a gay hubbub issuing from the classrooms, a band was tuning up and some very familiar voice began to sing: "Vast is my native land. . . ."

And down below in the little garden where the poplars grew, and in the fields beyond Staro-Kuznetsk, it was night. The air was filled with the scent of bird cherry and young grass, and for some reason he felt his heart beating loud and fast.

School, lessons, the familiar textbooks in their much-thumbed covers—all that was part of yesterday. And what of tomorrow?

Two new big plants, an aluminium and a ferro-alloy works, had sprung up not far from Staro-Kuznetsk in the past few years. He could go to work at either of them, for so long as father was at the front Mikhail would be the head of the family. Yet he was drawn to the coal mines, perhaps because the work there was harder and

hence to him there was more honour attached to it. His mother had a simpler explanation for it.

"It's Uncle Mitri's blood in him," she would say to the neighbours. "He was tough, Mitri was. Went down the mine until he was ninety. I'll never forget that night he came home after his shift, washed himself, stretched out on the couch under the icons, and passed away without saying another word."

... Mikhail left for the neighbouring colliery with one small suitcase and a bundle of books.

At the vocational school he was offered the opportunity of training as an engineman, but he refused. He wanted to mine coal.

"Not a bad choice, my boy," the school principal agreed. "Nothing like the face for strapping lads like you. But you'll have to learn to operate machinery in any case, because you can't do anything in the mines nowadays without machines."

That was exactly how Mikhail looked at it. In the first place, with his physique he was bound to make a good showing, and secondly, a hewer was, after all, a person of importance in the mine. But there was another consideration which he could not very well confide to the principal, and that was that the very day he arrived at the vocational school whom should he meet but Sevastyan Yemelyanov!

Sevastyan had joined the hewers' group in the school the month before. When Mikhail first met him there, he was standing in an attitude of studied indifference under the honour board on which his photograph was prominently displayed.

One of the rivals had beaten the other by a month. One had distinguished himself, the other not yet. By this

time, however, their schoolboy rivalry had vanished, and in its place had come the impetuous ardour of youth.

"I believe in living so that you haven't time even to catch your breath!" was Yemelyanov's favourite maxim.

Mikhail was worried. He would have to make up for lost time. What's more, he had had a letter from his father in Breslau area asking him how he was getting along.

They finished the course at the same time and it was then that they had their first serious talk.

"Had a chat with an engineer the other day," Sevastyan began with an important air. "He says the prospects around here are pretty good."

"What pit are you going to?"

"What about yourself?"

"I'm going to Kapitalnaya."

"I've decided to try No. 10 for a while"

"You're doing the right thing."

"Why?"

"Well, I don't think there'd be room for the two of us in one pit, do you?"

Sevastyan secretly concurred with this view. Fingering an imaginary moustache, he casually remarked that he intended getting married, not right away of course, but in a year or two. . . .

"A bit risky, straight off like that, isn't it?" Mikhail said dubiously.

"I'll think it over. There's no hurry, of course."

"Well, if you think it over. . ." Mikhail cast a supercilious look at his comrade.

About a year after that conversation an amazing thing happened. Mikhail bumped into Sevastyan at the market. His erstwhile rival was engaged in a curious occupation

—he was holding a baby's bathtub up to the light making a critical inspection of the bottom.

Mikhail burst out laughing.

"Getting ready for a cruise down the river, eh?"

Sevastyan swung round, startled, and blushed furiously.

"You see, it's . . . er, this way . . ." he stammered, tapping the bath bottom with his finger. "The management's gone and given me a cottage . . ."

Mikhail noted with surprise that Sevastyan had changed since he had seen him last: he was a man now, he was even broader in the shoulders. "What the dickens are you going to do with a cottage?" he asked.

"Live there, of course!" laughed the other. "I'm expecting a son soon, you see. Got to prepare a few things." And turning round, he called: "Katya!"

Katya came up. Mikhail remembered her; she had attended a locomotive drivers' course at the vocational school. He noticed that her round, dark-complexioned face was not as pretty as it had once been; there were dark spots over her eyebrows, her upper lip and on her chin.

"Hullo, Misha," she said and smiled shyly, or so it seemed to Mikhail.

All the way back to the hostel he kept muttering scornfully:

"Going around buying baby bathtubs!"

He was firmly convinced that Sevastyan had gained little by beating him in a thing like marriage. As for himself, marriage was a long, long way off.

Curiously enough, however, after this encounter Mikhail took a dislike to the hostel. For some reason it began to seem dreary and uncomfortable. With a rising feeling

of irritation he walked across the room, stepping aside to avoid Mitenka, who was crouched on all fours chalking some drawing on the unpainted floor with the other four crew members squatting around him and nodding significantly at every excited remark he made. They were at it again, discussing a system for bringing up coal which Mitenka believed was going to revolutionize mining techniques. He had been working on it for over a month.

"See the point?" the budding inventor was saying. "We'll do away with pillars here. Then the roof'll press down from here, and from here . . . and the coal will be coming out so fast from this end that you'll have your hands full feeding empty trams."

"With all that pressing down, it's coffins you'll be needing, not empties," Yuri Sayenog said sceptically.

"Who's talking about coffins?" said Mitenka, with a contemptuous glance at the critic. "Can't you see how the coal would be forced down by the pressure of the roof? Where's your brains?"

Cherepanov lay down on his cot, turned his face to the wall and pretended to be asleep. But no sooner had he closed his eyes than he saw Sevastyan with his bathtub again.

What if he had gone and got married! Everybody had to work out his own destiny in life. For one it was baby's bathtubs, for another—a fellow like Cherepanov now—it was a crew of coal miners.

He would like to see what Sevastyan would do if he were in his, Cherepanov's shoes even for one day. True, they were all good lads in his crew, but before they'd got used to working together they were forever rubbing one another the wrong way, always on the verge of a fight. And if you went to the Komsomol Committee about it

they'd tell you: "You're the crew leader, you ought to pay more attention to their education."

Education indeed! Sanka Lukin too kept harping on the same thing: "Are they going to educate us or aren't they?" "Didn't Vasili Ocheredko give you a whole hour's education today?" Mitenka once retorted.

How could you think about education when people would not always take you seriously, even though you were mining coal at the face. It wasn't easy to get used to the work, and the fact that the older workers didn't believe you could cope with the job made it all the harder. The others weren't so bad, but the section chief had been pretty mean about it. He would give them props for three or four cuts and when they asked for more, he'd shout at them:

"What? More props? Are you crazy? I have enough to do keeping the real miners supplied without bothering about you!"

Just try and talk with a man like that—how can you expect a fellow to grow up into a real miner if you don't help him?

True, there had been certain "excesses," to quote the hostel manager, but certainly not at work. There was the time when Mitenka ha' been sent to the store to buy some provisions for the hostel and had come back with hats for the whole crew. He had remembered on the way that there was to be a youth party in a few days' time and he wanted to make sure the boys would look their best.

"You didn't pick up any of those... what d'you call 'em... swallow-tails, did you?" Cherepanov had asked as he piled up the hats one on top of the other.

"Swallow-tails?" Mitenka was taken aback. "Honest, I didn't see any."

As for Ocheredko, he had been very sarcastic about the hat incident. "You're doing fine, boys, fine!" he said.

Things got much better after Section Seven was included in Rogov's district. Ever since that first talk, Rogov had given the crew constant encouragement in that stern yet understanding way of his: "Go to it, lads, go to it!"

Of course, it had not been altogether smooth going. Once they had been put to work on a seam that had been abandoned long before. Even a brief examination showed Cherepanov that they would hardly be able to fulfil the quota for the shift. Two rock strata cut diagonally across the metre-and-a-half seam, the timbering was not right and the chute was all clogged up. The crew was up in arms.

"Let's tell Pavel Gordeyevich right away!" Mitenka burst out. "What do they think they're doing! Pavel Gordeyevich will give it to them for letting the workings get into this shape. . . ."

The others agreed. Mitenka was chosen to go and telephone to Rogov.

"Bad seam. eh?" the engineer said.

"It's a disgrace, Pavel Gordeyevich!" Mitenka said quickly. "Imagine sending a Komsomol crew to such a rotten hole! It's a dirty trick, if you ask me. We've been hanging around for an hour and a half already."

"Hanging around, eh?" There was a pause. "Very well, hang around, but I'll see that you answer for it tomorrow."

Mitenka felt as if something had hit him on the head. He looked fearfully into the receiver, carefully hung it back on the hook and slipped out of the dispatcher's office. He ran all the way to the section, stumbling and almost sobbing as he went.

"Still hanging around, eh?" he shouted from a distance. "Who's going to do the work if we don't, you ninnies!"

Choking with shame and anger, he could say no more. But the others did not stop to ask questions. They rushed to the seam, ran for timber and empties.

Toward the end of the shift Rogov looked in. He inspected the working, while the youth crew waited tensely, uncertain whether he would scold them for complaining or praise them for their work. For the seam had been literally transformed during the shift. Rogov did neither. He paused beside Cherepanov and said:

"There's one hour left. Timber the upper benches properly with braces."

As they were on their way home after the shift Sanka Lukin suddenly burst out laughing.

"The way we started bawling: 'Comrade Rogov, take pity on us!'"

"Pity us poor little Komsomol lads!" Cherepanov caught up. "Save us from the nasty man!"

They roared with laughter. After such incidents they felt ashamed rather than hurt; it was as if a load had been lifted from their shoulders and they were eager to show what they could do. They began to take real pleasure in their work and the genuine comradeship of their fellow-workers was an inspiration to them.

Take Khmelchenko, for instance. He had come to the hostel together with Komsomol organizer Annushka Yermolayeva the day after the memorable Stakhanovite meeting.

"So this is where you live!" he said after greeting the lads.

"That's right," the young men chorussed

"Fine diggings!" Khmelchenko said without enthusiasm. "Rather filthy if you ask me. Disgrace to the Kuzbas."

He turned to Yermolayeva.

"The Komsomol has done you the honour of electing you organizer. Is this how you attend to your duties?" he said heavily. "Shameful, that's what it is! All right," he added, "I'm not going to say any more now. But I'll drop in tomorrow."

Next day the room had been scrubbed and white-washed, dazzling white linen appeared on the beds, and Yuri Sayenog refrained from lying down on his bed in dirty overalls.

When Khmelchenko arrived and saw the transformation a smile appeared under his sparse moustache.

"Now look at that! I'd call that pretty rapid re-education!" he said in a tone somewhere between praise and sarcasm.

The boys had expected that the veteran miner would get down at once to the business of drawing up a socialist emulation agreement.

"He's terribly strict," Sanka Lukin, who was a local lad, had told the others. "He even writes down his own output every shift."

As it was, however, Khmelchenko said nothing about the agreement, but simply chatted pleasantly with the boys for an hour or two. They soon felt at ease with him.

Mitenka and Sanka as usual started an argument as to what was the most important profession in coal mining.

"The hewer, of course," said Mitenka.

"Bosh!" Sanka spat contemptuously. "Nobody's more important than an engineer."

"I wouldn't say that," Khmelchenko put in "Whoever works the best is tops."

"That's right!" said Yuri Sayenog. "Look at Ocheredko. He's a technician too but he's neither fish nor fowl."

"He's just a zero," Khmelchenko agreed. "You'd think by the noise he makes that he's really got something in him. But scratch the surface and all you find is a gasbag."

After this the boys began to call the section chief "Gasbag "

Cherepanov opened his eyes and turned on his back. Damn it! It was all so stupid! That gasbag Ocheredko was acting district engineer now, while Rogov, with whom it was a real pleasure to work, was going to the Tenth for some unknown reason. The crew had been too shocked by the news to comment at first. Then Sanka Lukin started in a round-about way, he has an aunt—well, maybe not an aunt, but a relative in any case—who lived out at the Tenth, she'd been inviting him over for some time now. Perhaps he ought to think seriously about moving.

"Maybe she could put up the whole lot of us," Mitenka suggested, voicing a thought that had occurred to them all—why not shift over to the Tenth where Pavel Gordeyevich would now be working? The crew leader himself had to interfere and tell the lads to stop that sort of silly talk. That was not the right spirit at all. Wide awake now, Cherepanov turned his attention to what his comrades were saying. They were arguing about the sign Mitenka had put up at the hostel entrance.

The day before the local paper had carried a feature story by Chernov about their crew entitled "Young

Forces." A good story written with feeling, it had inspired Mitenka to put up a sign on the front door reading: "Here Live the Young Forces."

Sayenog objected violently. "Take it down," he said. "People will only laugh at us."

"You're damned right," Sibirtsev backed him up. "We're supposed to be miners, after all. Our crew is named after a Hero."

"Let's put it to the vote," suggested Lukin

But Cherepanov had got up and looked at the clock. The argument ended abruptly. It was time to go to work.

The shift started well. There was a bit of trouble getting the empties, and some hitch with the timber, but all in all the work hummed and the lads felt quite elated. Having finished with his section of the face, Cherepanov walked down the length of the working and saw that everything was in order. Only Mitenka was missing.

"Where's Mitenka?" Cherepanov asked Sibirtsev.

The latter unhurriedly inserted a wedge between the top of a prop and the roof and drove it in with a single blow before answering.

"How should I know. . . . He got through with his section a couple of hours ago."

The timekeeper too claimed she had not seen him. A little worried, the boys checked out after the shift and went home, only to find Mitenka there, all scrubbed and rosy and busy getting tea ready.

"What's the idea?" Sayenog demanded, but stopped short when he noticed Dubintsev sitting at the window.

"Here come the pride and glory of the Kuzbas," Mitenka purred as he planted a kettle as big as a pail on the

table. "What do you say to some tea? And some bread and butter I picked up on the way at the store?"

The others showed no pleasure. Cherepanov pulled off his jacket in silence, then picked up the kettle and emptied it into the sink.

"Hey, what's the trouble? Didn't I do my quota..." Mitenka tried to smile, but finding no sign of sympathy on the faces of his comrades, he retreated in confusion to an awkward seat on the edge of a bed.

"How shall we take this up—through the management or the Komsomol?" said Lukin, who was the acting Komsomol group organizer, turning to Cherepanov.

"Both," Cherepanov replied.

"What is the matter?" asked Dubintsev, who had dropped in at the request of the Party Committee to have a talk with young workers about their five-year plan.

"He skipped from the job. . . . Loafed for two hours," Sayenog explained

Cherepanov took the floor. Seething with suppressed anger and resentment, he explained what an unpleasant position Mitenka had put the crew in. In a few days they were to check up on the progress of their emulation with Khmelchenko and now here they had a case of absenteeism to mar the record. Could a thing like that be concealed? And from whom? The state?

To make matters worse, they had received a challenge to an emulation contest from the crew of young miners headed by Sevastyan Yemelyanov. How could they accept a challenge like that with this thing on their conscience? Cherepanov banged his tin mug against the table.

"You all know what it means?"

"Expel him!" Sayenog said in a relentless tone.

"Publicly!" Lukin supported him.

"Hear! hear!" Georgi Sibirtsev rose cautiously from his chair and sat down again just as cautiously, for many a chair had collapsed under the weight of his huge frame.

"Let's get this thing quite clear first," Dubintsev suggested. "What I don't see is why Mitenka let the crew down."

By this time passions subsided somewhat and the discussion took a more sober turn. Mitenka himself was asked to explain.

"I'm to blame, of course . . ." he said, casting a confused glance about him.

"To blame for what?" prompted Dubintsev.

"For . . . well . . . for leaving early . . . Thought I'd get the tea ready for the others . . . Seemed to me they'd only be grateful."

"But you did your quota?"

"Of course I did. That's just it!" Mitenka livened up. "I don't see how we can keep on working the way we do. There are six of us for the twelve benches in the seam. That's two per man. It's not enough I say . . . Gets pretty dull."

"That's true enough," Sibirtsev agreed. "It's not serious the way we're working."

"No elbow room. Too many of us," Sayenog conceded.

"The more the merrier," said Lukin.

"For whom? For the pit or you?" Cherepanov retorted. He frowned and looked questioningly at Dubintsev.

"What are we going to do about it, scatter in all directions?" Alesha Aleshkov, the quietest of the lads, nicknamed "Gypsy," said as he fingered his pitch-black hair with a perplexed air.

The question set everybody thinking. Mitenka's escapade was temporarily forgotten. What indeed was to be

done? As long as the lads had been wholly engrossed in the business of learning the trade and winning the right to call themselves full-fledged miners, it had been pleasant to work shoulder to shoulder. But gradually they had grown out of their apprenticeship and the seam had really become too small for them all.

Dubintsev, who himself had but recently embarked upon adult life, felt a warm glow within him as he watched the young miners grappling with the problem of how to forge ahead, how to keep together without getting in each other's way. And for the first time he realized that yesterday's apprentices had developed into real miners.

The way out seemed simple. If two benches were not enough let each take four. And since the seam was not so big the crew would have to go over to a three-shift schedule. Dubintsev suggested as much to the lads, only they would have to find another three miners to make three men to a shift.

"We don't need anybody else," Cherepanov objected, pacing up and down the room "Two'll be enough for each shift."

"Six benches per man?" Dubintsev was astonished.

"We could do it!" Sibirtsev put in with a sharp movement that made the chair groan so loud that everybody turned to look at him.

"If it wasn't for Ocheredko . . ." Cherepanov said with a note of doubt in his voice. "Too bad we haven't got Pavel Gordeyevich with us. He was the man for the job. Why did they have to transfer him to the Tenth?"

"That's another matter," Dubintsev said, and carried away by the general enthusiasm turned the talk back to the suggestion that had just been made to have two miners on each shift

"What about me?" Mitenka asked timidly.

Six long faces turned simultaneously toward him.

"That's a hitch of course," Cherepanov said thoughtfully. "It would be a pity to throw him out."

"How did you get away without checking out?" Lukin wanted to know.

"That's simple..." Mitenka's colourless eyelashes whipped up and down. "There's a way out of the old seam into the abandoned shaft—you can get through if you crawl on your belly..."

"So that's what you did!" Sibirtsev said.

"Don't throw me out!" Mitenka pleaded. "I'd be lost without you fellows, honest I would."

"Let's give him a reprimand," Sayenog suggested uncertainly.

The others agreed. But as he was leaving, Dubintsev saw Sayenog corner Mitenka and shake his fist under his nose saying: "That's only the official decision, see? But you haven't heard the last of this from us!" *

Cherepanov was right in fearing that Ocheredko would turn out to be a stumbling block. When Dubintsev suggested that the crew be transferred to a three-shift schedule, the acting district engineer was violently opposed to the idea.

"Have you lost your senses, young man? We're barely making the plan as it is. The thing is bound to fall through, and who'll have to take the blame? No, I won't allow it!"

Dubintsev shrugged his shoulders in unconscious imitation of Annushka, and went to see the Party organizer. After that Bondarchuk called in Ocheredko and kept him for a good quarter of an hour.

As he hurried out of the Party organizer's office, Ocheredko bumped into Cherepanov and surprised the miner by first greeting him rather politely and then snapping at him:

"Come to complain, I suppose?"

But the crew was transferred to a three-shift schedule

CHAPTER XVI

Rogov spent all that day in the technical department. He was taking advantage of the "troubled times," as he called the period of his enforced idleness, to clear up the paper work that had to be done in preparation for opening the new coal field.

It was painstaking work, consuming a great deal of time and energy, and much of it was rather dull. And in the brief intervals he allowed himself for a smoke he took particular pleasure in turning over in his mind an idea that had occurred to him recently: a mining shield adapted for working an unusually long stretch of seam. He had worked it out in his head and sketched it on paper and he could see that the new device would effect a tremendous economy, although exactly how much, it was as yet difficult to determine.

Annushka worked at a drawing board on Rogov's left. Opposite him behind a huge desk sat the department chief, Sevastyanov, who was constantly ringing up the mine.

"Those people down below will be the death of me!" he cried after every argument over the telephone.

Listening to him one might think that the men at the face had nothing to do but annoy the chief of the technical department. But for all that Sevastyanov was a good en-

gineer eager for anything new, though he was somewhat overwhelmed by the mass of current production detail.

"What's that?" he shouted into the receiver. "No, I won't hear of it! Engineer Rogov is alive and kicking, he's sitting right here in front of me and I tell you I'm not going to let anything hold up the high-speed tunnelling! The chief engineer? What about him? Well, go ahead and talk to him. He'll give it to you hot! . . . Ocheredko's going in for reforms," he briefly announced to no one in particular when he had hung up. "I can't imagine what Drobot was thinking of when he gave the job to that dummy."

Several times that morning Sevastyanov had paused behind Rogov's desk. Finally his curiosity got the better of him.

"What's that?" he queried, pointing to the pencil sketch of the shield.

Rogov reluctantly gave a general outline of his idea, he was afraid that the department chief would not take him seriously. To his surprise the other grew quite excited. He scratched his pink bald pate and bent over to scrutinize the drawing, leaning heavily on Rogov's shoulder.

They discussed it until late that evening. Sevastyanov was tremendously enthusiastic about the idea and ended up by taking the now heavily scored-up sketch from Rogov to work on at his leisure.

"You don't mind, I hope?" he asked anxiously.

They parted friends and as he went outside, into the darkness shot through with light from the windows of the office building, Rogov remarked to himself: "Well, that's one up for our side."

He had no desire to go home. He knew that Valya would again take possession of his thoughts as had been

the case so often in the past few days, and he could not allow himself to succumb to heartache at this juncture.

As he entered the dispatching office Dubintsev pounced on him.

"Pavel Gordeyevich, Ocheredko is turning everything upside down here. He's given orders to put the Cherepanov boys to work on various small sections."

"Wha-at!" Rogov glared at the technician. "Why, that amounts to disbanding the crew? And you agreed?"

"Do you think I'm a child?" Dubintsev drew himself up and met Rogov's glance squarely. "Think I don't understand? Of course I could see he was practically disbanding the crew—but that's not the chief trouble now...."

"Why did he do it?" Rogov cut in.

"Oh, he has an urgent job on hand," Dubintsev said with a dry smile. "The district engineer intends to make a record today. He's putting Derenkov at the seam by himself. But I can't allow it, Pavel Gordeyevich, I can't allow it! It's that silly business of working in sudden spurts instead of keeping a steady efficient pace! You yourself often talk about the need to fight conservatism. Turning out records like this is also conservatism—it will never get us anywhere! It's... it's a downright outrage!"

"Be specific, man!"

"I am being specific. You know Seam 31? It's in no shape for that sort of work. I've been keeping an eye on it for a long time now and I know it's just about time to gob it. But what can I do? Ocheredko's in charge now!"

Rogov also knew that Seam 31 was ready for gobbing, for a coal seam can be worked only to a certain point

without danger of the roof caving in. When this point is reached two solid rows of props are placed in the immediate neighbourhood of the breast of the seam and the roof over the empty space behind them is collapsed. This reduces the pressure of the upper layers at the face to the minimum and the element of danger is eliminated.

"The roof in Seam 31 is very unreliable. With care you could get another one or two shifts out of it," Dubintsev went on agitatedly, "but to try to make a record under such conditions. . . ."

Rogov looked up anxiously at the technician.

"Have you told Drobot? What did he say?"

"He swore at first. 'The blockhead,' he said. Then he grinned and shrugged his shoulders."

"Make out the assignments on the old schedule," Rogov advised him. "And if Ocheredko still insists on interfering, phone Drobot and tell him that Hero of the Soviet Union Danilov himself is coming tomorrow to visit the crew named after him. So there wouldn't be much point in dispersing the youngsters today."

"Pavel Gordeyevich!" Dubintsev gasped, his eyes round with surprise. "You mean to say Danilov himself?"

"Danilov himself. And you can tell Cherepanov to pass the word on to the boys that Stepan is a tough fellow, so they had better look out!"

Rogov elbowed his way through the crowd of miners blocking the entrance to the dispatching room. The usual brief production conference was in progress. Afanasi Petrovich Voshchin was addressing the men from the platform where the presidium usually sat during regular meetings. Rogov's interest was aroused, for Voshchin rarely spoke in public. Moreover, he looked unusually agitated just now.

"Every day brings us closer to the end of the five-year plan," he was saying. "If you miss a shift, you can't make up for it any more. And what are we doing? Strange things are happening, comrades! By working hard we were able to keep first place in the trust, even won the banner too, and now for more than a week we've been slipping. What's happened? What's the reason for the miserable figures we're chalking up: 90 per cent one day, 80, the next? I don't know about you, but I think it's a disgrace!"

Never mind about us, you talk about your own disgrace!" a hostile voice was heard.

"I'm talking about all of us," Voshchin flared up, "There are some of us who think that now the war is over and Hitler's hash has been settled we can afford to sit back and take it easy. And some of us are pretty clever at shirking work."

"Let's have names!"

"I'll get around to names too. . . . Engineer Rogov was right at that Stakhanovite meeting. In some sections we have ten auxiliary workers to every miner working at the face. What sort of output can you expect under such conditions? What about production costs? Technology is neglected, the best hewers have been scattered all over the place: there's a hewer in the lamp house, a hewer at the gate, and hewers driving ponies. The other day I looked in at the soft drink stand and who did I see but my old mate Nikanor Ozhgikhin selling soda water, at five kopeks a litre. 'Why, man, are you crazy?' I ask him. 'Why? What's wrong?' he said. 'I'm mining water out of a tap.'"

He waited for the laughter to subside, wiped his perspiring face and continued:

"And our esteemed chief keeps harping on one thing: 'We've got traditions. We have always been first.' Maybe we were, but we aren't any more, Comrade Drobot. You know very well we can't go on living on past achievements."

"What's to be done, then, lie down and die?" someone demanded.

"Who said die!" With a defiant gesture Voshchin pushed the helmet to the back of his head which made him look years younger. "Here's what I say: we have our five-year plan, and each one of us has his part in that plan."

He paused, and then continued slowly and deliberately, punctuating every word with a gesture:

"I want the engineers to figure out what my share in the plan comes to, and I pledge here and now to do it in three years. And to begin with, I'm going down the mine and I'm going to hew..." slowly he walked over to the index board hanging on the back wall and with a flourish chalked up in big letters, "250 per cent," then after a moment's hesitation followed it with an exclamation mark.

"That's all very well," Ocheredko remarked acidly approaching the speaker. "There's nothing wrong with exclamation marks. But it might be wiser to put them in after the shift..."

"After the shift you'll get that exclamation mark where you won't like it!" a boyish voice interrupted the district engineer.

The hall shook with laughter.

At that moment a broad-shouldered lad in army uniform with reddish, closely cropped hair dashed up to the platform.

Rogov started—the round, good-humoured face with its look of artless confidence mingled with a certain peasant caution struck him as very familiar. Everything about the young man seemed to be saying: “I know what we all want!” He spoke without a flourish, as simply and naturally as if he was continuing a conversation begun at home.

“Some of you here probably know me. I used to work at Kapitalnaya.”

Most of the miners exchanged puzzled glances, but Rogov noticed that a few nodded approvingly at the speaker as much as to say, of course we know you, go ahead! The lad suddenly turned sharply round to the board, picked up the chalk, and with a firm hand wrote: “400 per cent.”

“Whew! That’s going some!” was the loud comment from the floor.

There was a loud buzz of voices:

“Why, that’s Voshchin’s boy Grigori. Just came back from the army.”

“He’s challenging the old man to a duel!”

“Some people had better look out or he’ll be stepping on their heels!”

Rogov remembered that he had intended visiting the Voshchins for some time, and made a firm resolution to drop in and see the miner’s family at the first opportunity.

He went down the pit and made straight for Section Seven. In the main gallery a large group of miners were crowded around Ocheredko and Dubintsev. Rogov had no intention of interfering, he had merely wanted to make sure that everything was all right. Perhaps he was deceiving himself, fearing to admit that he was prompted by a gnawing envy even of the chuteman who was loading

coal in the cars at the moment. He halted at a distance from the group and listened to Voshchin's voice raised in irritation.

"This is the second shift we've been hanging about waiting for empties! When are they coming?" he demanded. "High-speed workings are no joke. Didn't you see my son Grigori come down with me for his first shift? How can I let him get ahead of me?"

"I know all about it," Ocheredko said waving aside the miner's objections. "I know how important this face is for you, but I need the empties somewhere else today. I have a record to make!"

As soon as Voshchin had gone, cursing the district engineer under his breath, Ocheredko turned impatiently to Dubintsev.

"Well? How's Derenkov getting on?"

"Comrade Ocheredko, I'm responsible for that seam," the technician began slowly. "It's a risky business."

"Risky? Do you think you can mine coal without taking risks?" Ocheredko sounded surprised, and with the obvious intention of stinging the young section chief, added: "What's the trouble? Weak heart?"

"I am no coward," he replied, very calmly, controlling himself with an effort. "But there are certain technical rules that must be adhered to."

For some reason Ocheredko seemed pleased

"Rules? But rules aren't a dead letter, are they? Rules are made by people! You're a technician, you ought to know that mining is half science and half art. What's more, you don't need to teach me technology. I've worked in mines for sixteen years and I don't need you to tell me whether a seam is safe or not!"

Dubintsev lowered his head stubbornly.

"That upper seam can't be worked."

"You've got my orders!"

"I'm sorry. I'm responsible for the section."

"I'll . . . I'll have you dismissed!" Ocheredko stuck out his chin belligerently. "You're a coward, that's what you are!"

"You. . . ."

Rogov laid a hand on Dubintsev's shoulder.

"Take it easy."

Ocheredko raised his battery lamp.

"Who's that?"

"The section chief is right," said Rogov, watching the swift change of expression taking place on Ocheredko's face.

That face was a study. Bewilderment turned instantly to deep irritation and irritation to satisfaction which might be interpreted thus: "Aha, so you've turned up! Well, what have you got to say for yourself? I'm in charge of the district now!" But aloud he said very calmly, fingering a button on his collar:

"Outsiders have no business here."

Rogov was amused, but Ocheredko suddenly lost his temper.

"Engineer Rogov, I forbid you to come to my district and upset my . . . my arrangements. You've done enough interfering. I'm in charge here now!"

Rogov ignored this. He asked where Cherepanov and his crew were working. Dubintsev's face cleared.

"It's a pleasure to see those boys," he said. "I got the old seam back for them today. They promised to do a cycle and a half. And they'll do it! Would you like to have a look at them, Pavel Gordeye, ich?"

Rogov went down to the seam.

As soon as he saw the engineer, Cherepanov began complaining to him about Khmelchenko whom he had challenged to emulation.

"He's grabbed the initiative away from me and comes around criticizing us. Today too he came and grumbled about everything. Gave us a regular lecture. 'Fumblers, that's what you are,' he says 'Is this the way I taught you to blast, eh? The coal's got to come down neat at the face and not be blown all over the place.' Then he grouched about our timbering and the condition of our tools. And for punishment, he told us all to report to his house after the shift so he could show us how to grind the axes and set the saws "

Cherepanov seemed to be somewhat piqued by the criticism, but Rogov could tell at once that he had no doubts as to his crew's ability to make a good showing. The boys had obviously found their place.

"Last night he came to the hostel," Cherepanov went on. "We were in a hurry to go to the club but he said we had plenty of time. Then he pulled a book out of his pocket about some flyer who'd been behind the German lines. 'I couldn't find anything about miners so I decided to bring this,' he said 'Here, suppose you read it aloud.' He shoved the book into my hands and told the fellows to sit still and listen. So I read for a couple of hours and the fellows really did listen. After that we quarrelled "

"With whom?"

"With Khmelchenko of course. We'd just got half way through the story when he gets up and asks for the book back. We begged him to let us have it for the night but he wouldn't. 'You'd better read it when I'm around,' he says "

Cherepanov turned around and shouted up to an upper ledge:

"Yurka, soon finished there?"

"Just about—we're ready to blast."

Rogov was favourably impressed by the order he found in the seam: there was no fussing, no shouting, plenty of timber in stock, slab flooring, chute clear—in short, everything ready for blasting and conveying the coal.

Cherepanov clearly expected the engineer to make some comment, but Rogov said nothing. He only pressed the crew leader's hand more warmly than usual as he took his leave.

At the dispatching point Rogov bumped into Dubintsev again

"Everything's going fine, Pavel Gordeyevich," he reported hurriedly. "I'm only worried about 31 where Derenkov is working. I had to give in to Ocheredko—perhaps it'll be all right."

Before Rogov had time to reply the man on duty at the dispatching point called him. The Party organizer had phoned down to the pit several times asking for him.

"Ah, the missing man!" Bondarchuk said when he phoned up. Rogov thought he heard the Party organizer chuckle, although his voice sounded stern enough when he ordered Rogov to come and see him at once.

Fifteen minutes later Rogov was entering Bondarchuk's office. Drobot and Filenkov were there. Bondarchuk held out his hand to Rogov and inquired in a tone that struck Rogov as slightly ironical:

"What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Made an excursion to the pit," he returned dryly, and noticing that Drobot was bristling and Filenkov fidgeting nervously on his chair, he thought with a pang of resentment: "Been complaining that I don't submit to orders."

"Read that!" Bondarchuk pushed a slip of paper toward him.

The typewritten text was very faint and Rogov's hands shook so that he had to lay the slip of paper on the table before he could read it.

"Kuzbas Collieries Administration. . . . Re removal of P. M. Drobot from the post of chief of Kapitalnaya Pit. . . Pending investigation of reasons for the shortage of 15,491 tons of coal in the bunkers. . . ."

And further down in the last paragraph:

"Appoint as acting chief of the pit. . . ."

Rogov's shoulders twitched and he unconsciously took note of the web of tiny wrinkles that seamed Drobot's face.

"Why me?"

"I don't know!" Bondarchuk said impatiently. "We're not here to discuss the order. You'd better get busy. Get in touch with the trust and the coal field administration. Tomorrow you will report to the Bureau of the City Committee about organizational and technical measures for the fourth quarter. The pit has to be made ready for winter. Get to work, comrade acting chief!"

Rogov noticed the merry twinkle in Bondarchuk's eyes and he himself had difficulty in repressing a smile that would hardly have been in place at the moment.

"Well. . . ." The Party organizer was evidently about to shake his hand, but at that moment the telephone rang and he picked up the receiver instead. For a few seconds he listened, and his face muscles twitched and the swarthy skin over his eyebrows paled. "When did it happen? Who's in charge of the district? Where's Ocheredko?" he rapped out, and dropping the receiver, cried: "Dubintsev has been caught under a fall. . . ." His eyes

came to rest on Rogov. "Hurry down! I'll be along right away."

Drobot and Filenkov leapt to their feet simultaneously. Rogov dashed out of the office.

"Stay at the phones!" he shouted back at the two men as he plunged down the stairs.

On the way he grabbed a battery lamp—from whom he never found out.

"Accident! Quick!" he shouted to the hoist operator as he leapt into the waiting cage.

There was the clanging of the signal bells, followed by tense silence, then a tremor passed through the cage and it plunged into the chill depths of the shaft. During the last fraction of a second Rogov noticed Annushka with features turned to stone standing next to the operator, her fingers clawing at the kerchief knot under her chin.

"Kolya, Kolya!" she moaned. And her head fell back.

...As the electric locomotive hurtled down the tracks breaking all speed limits, Rogov tried to reconstruct a mental picture of the layout of the caved-in working—but for some reason or other he could not put the pieces of the pattern together. His thoughts kept leaping from the talk with Bondarchuk to Dubintsev's argument with Ocheredko.

And all the while Dubintsev stood before his eyes, his head set at a stubborn angle and eyebrows quivering with barely restrained anger. "You can't work the upper seam!" he had said glaring at Ocheredko.

Rogov's nails cut into the palms of his hands. It was a disgrace that by Drobot's whim that incompetent, conceited windbag should have been appointed district engineer!

He thought of the hundreds of miners, separated from each other by heavy layers of rock and coal, going about their work at that moment—hewing, drilling, loading, taking cover during blasting, pushing trams, laying new tracks—yet in the midst of that incessant motion the thoughts of them all—even those in the most distant workings—were in Seam 31, with the young man whom many of them did not even know by name. Was he dead or alive?

At the sharp curves it seemed that the electric locomotive would crash into the timbers that leapt to meet it. But Rogov did not see them.

“Faster, faster!” he urged the driver.

Through the pounding of the wheels came the whine of the motors. One more turn. There to the left was the horse track of Section Seven. Rogov swung his lamp.

“Stop!”

The brakes screeched and a heavy silence settled over everything. Rogov ran into a large group of workers besieging Derenkov.

Raising his lamp in order to see the miner's face, he demanded the details of the accident.

“What's this, a cross-examination?” Derenkov shouted back. “Who do you think you are, the public prosecutor?”

“Shut up!” Rogov stopped him in a low voice and asked the others where Ocheredko was

“Here,” the latter responded in an unusually meek tone from behind somebody's back. “I'm off to the chief... to report in person...”

“You're wanted in person right here,” Rogov said, surveying the men around him.

The score or so of miners kept a tense silence. From above, where the fall had taken place, came the sound of double blows delivered in rapid succession.

"Who's out there?" Rogov asked, somewhat surprised.

"Voshchin and his son," Cherepanov replied.

"It's no use..." Derenkov made a gesture of despair with his hand. "You should have seen the fall—couldn't dig through it in a month."

"How did it happen?" Rogov cut in.

"How?" the miner hesitated for a moment. "I told him, the chief, I mean, 'Don't go in there,' and he replied 'What the hell has it got to do with you? Who's in charge here, you or me?' No sooner had he gone in than the roof came down, clean as if cut with a knife..."

"Where was he at the time—in the gallery or at the face?"

"How do I know?" Derenkov burst out. "When that fall came down I was shot out of there like a cork before I knew what was happening."

Rogov was certain that Derenkov had not been at the face at the time of the fall. Dubintsev may have had time to climb up to the intermediate gallery; if so they had to get there without delay by way of the timber slide on the near side of the working and at the same time dig in from below, cutting through a pillar and clearing away the fall. But how much time that would require! Would Dubintsev be able to hold out, would he have enough air, would they succeed in establishing contact with him?

"When a human life is in question, nothing is impossible!" Rogov told himself firmly.

Taking Cherepanov and Ocheredko with him, he hurried into a manhole.

CHAPTER XVII

...The rescue workers had been at it for more than a day and a night. But when Rogov suggested relieving Cherepanov's crew the lad flared up at him.

"Leave us alone!" the crew leader snapped. "You haven't the right to interfere!"

The fall was being cleared away from the breast and the men had advanced about ten metres or so. They worked in pairs, and while one pair worked the others rested right there in the gallery. Four timbermen were constantly bringing in props, which had to be placed so close together that the men could barely crawl between them, the displaced roof would not hold.

The Komsomol lads began to look worn, their eyes glittered feverishly, and their voices grew hoarse. Food was brought to them where they worked, their lamp batteries were changed on the spot, and their tools too were delivered to them. But fatigue was beginning to tell: they took shorter turns at work, slept more restlessly, and talked in monosyllables. Derenkov tried to lend a hand, but Sayenog, who was resting in the gallery below, stopped him.

"Get out, you. . . . We want clean hands here!"

Once, as Lukin and Cherepanov were about to change places at the breast, they heard someone behind them heave a sigh.

"Annushka!"

Cherepanov did not turn around, only his breathing quickened. Annushka sat down in a corner, looking up with questioning eyes. The crew leader felt his mouth grow dry—she could not have chosen a more awkward time to come. He had just removed a small slab of rock

exposing the hem of a canvas jacket; he pulled at it lightly, but it did not yield—only a crushed bone button remained in his hand.

The blood pounded at Cherepanov's temples and his arms grew limp. He coughed to attract Lukin's attention, then signed with his eyes at the button in his hand and at Annushka. Sanka caught on.

"Hadn't you better go down into the gallery, Annushka?" he suggested tactfully. "We've got to timber and it'll be a tight squeeze."

She nodded, but after descending some three metres hid between the props where the miners could not see her.

"Quick!" Cherepanov was in a hurry.

Cracking their finger nails, ready to drop from exhaustion, they wrestled with the chunks of rock, unable to tear their eyes away from the strip of canvas. Carefully they rolled aside a huge bluish slab and exposed the sleeve; ten minutes later the jacket had been extracted.

"It's not his," Annushka breathed just behind them.

Cherepanov and Lukin looked at each other and sighed. The canvas jacket, which had been abandoned in the working by Derenkov, showed them that they were on the right track, and infused them with new strength.

Sibirtsev and an unknown young man wearing a brand new outfit of working clothes came up to relieve Cherepanov and Lukin. The crew leader frowned, but the newcomer did not appear to notice.

"Danilov's the name," he introduced himself.

Cherepanov was so taken aback that he did not know what to say. He simply exchanged a firm handclasp with the newcomer. At this critical moment in the life of the mine Stepan Danilov joined the crew and imperceptibly

became part of it. When some hours later Bondarchuk met Mitenka on his way to the surface and asked him how the new miner was getting along, the young man jerked his head in the direction of the gallery and said:

"Stepan Georgievich is taking a rest "

"And where may you be going?"

"Cherepanov sent me to get the tools sharpened," the young miner said disgustedly. "As if he couldn't send someone who wasn't working at the face." And with an important air he hurried on his way.

The morning air with a nip of frost in it and the rose hued wisps in the dome of the sky went to Mitenka's head like wine. How good it was up on the surface! Mitenka would have liked to stand there for a long time breathing in the fragrant air, but he had to hurry to the blacksmith shop.

"You'll have to wait an hour, my boy," the smith said and turned his back on him "I've had a time of it this shift . ."

"It's for Seam 31," Mitenka said.

"For 31?" the smith took a step toward Mitenka, then hastily swept some cinders off his anvil. "Why didn't you say so right away? Give 'em here, quick!"

Waiting for the tools, Mitenka stepped outside again. How good it was! Fresh air, wide open spaces, voices. . . He thought of Dubintsev trapped down below. How must he be feeling? Or was it all over? Mitenka shook his head. No! It could not be!

During his brief rest interval on the first day of rescue operations Mitenka had gone over to the old abandoned shaft which he had once used to slip out of the mine unnoticed. But bitter disappointment had awaited him there. The autumn rains have done their work—the shaft had

completely caved in. Where the tiny passage had been there now was a plug of no less than ten metres of rock covered with a heavy slip of clay.

Now Mitenka again gazed at the reddish-brown hill, at the row of old trial pits, and the gnawing impatient restlessness returned. "How can we let a man suffocate right nearby and do nothing about it?" But they were doing something about it! A rescue crew was working in from the nearest functioning shaft, and from below his own crew was hard at it. And the abandoned shaft had been inspected time and again by others' besides himself.

"But it won't hurt to have another look," he thought. "No one need ever know about it." He darted back to the smithy, picked up a sharpened pick and spurted up the hillside. He was quite out of breath by the time he reached the shaft. He looked down into the deep pit and in spite of himself his assurance vanished. No, there was nothing that could be done here! Mitenka looked around. His eyes rested on the brown collar of a still older shaft a few score metres away: it was no doubt completely filled by its crumbling sides. Reluctantly he approached it, bent over the edge once, looked again and then dropped down on the ground to peer at the bottom. Something black loomed down below. Could it be a passage? But even if it were, the first shaft would certainly block the way to the collapsed working. Besides there probably was no gallery left either—it must have been mined out with the coal. Mitenka spat angrily. "What's the sense in lying here guessing? Do something, find out!"

He clambered down the practically vertical sides of the pit. At one point he missed his foothold. He did not have time to take a proper grip on a protruding ledge, his feet slipped, the blue square of sky overhead tipped and he

fell. Luckily he landed on something soft, but for all that his head was ringing and his heart pounded madly. Catching his breath, he muttered:

"The devil! This did have to happen!"

A damp, musty smell issued from a dark opening in the side of the shaft. Mitenka sniffed, quickly got on his hands and knees, and, without pausing to consider whether he would be able to find his way back, plunged into the pitch-black hole.

CHAPTER XVIII

The entire day before the accident Annushka and Nikolai had been busy with domestic affairs and had even quarrelled a little.

They had decided that they would live at Nikolai's place, a small, long room connected by a little dark passageway with a kitchen which he shared with the family of Starodubtsev, chief of the underground transport.

All the necessary purchases had been made. There was not much furniture, but it would do for the beginning. Annushka had moved every piece herself from place to place about the room until everything was to her satisfaction.

Every day she hurried over to Nikolai's place after work and fussed over "her housework" for an hour or two, and then said good-bye "till tomorrow." Once Klavdia Stepanovna, Starodubtsev's wife, looked in as if by chance. She had a big stomach and a small thin face on which the long thin nose stood out very prominently. Assuming a benevolent expression, she inspected the room critically, poked a finger into the new spring mattress and

whispered something to Annushka which made the girl blush to the roots of her hair

"Heavens above!" said the visitor, heaving a deep sigh, "it was just the same when Semyon and I got married. We hadn't a thing. But, of course, it was easier for us. After all, Semyon is an engineer," Klavdia Stepanovna turned a pencilled eyebrow in Nikolai's direction, heaved another sigh for no apparent reason and withdrew.

Annushka was silent for a while, then she shrugged her slim shoulders.

"What of it? There's always time to become an engineer. You're the cleverest and nicest boy in the world even if you are only a technician."

They quarrelled the day before the accident for two reasons. The first was Annushka's discovery of a pair of dirty work boots under the new, spotlessly white bed.

"What's this?" she asked in a horrified whisper "What's this, Nikolai Victorovich?"

Nikolai Victorovich tried to laugh it off, but when he met Annushka's eye he got confused, blushed, mumbled something uncomplimentary about the boots and hastily bore them out of the room into the passage, thence into the kitchen and finally, followed by that unrelenting gaze, threw the mud-caked atrocities into a closet. When he came back to the room he frowned and in as deep a bass as he could muster, said:

"What's the idea of raising such a fuss over a trifle like that?"

"Kolya!" Annushka drew herself up, screwing up her little nose haughtily in a way Dubintsev thought quite adorable "Kolya!" she repeated, drawing herself up still more. But the next moment she threw her arms around

him, laughed softly and proposed that they draw up a list of invitations to the wedding.

And they very nearly quarrelled again over that. By the most modest estimate they found that they would have to entertain about forty guests, not counting all those who were bound to drop in by chance. They figured this way and that and still it was clear that even if they were to mobilize all the neighbours' furniture in addition to their own they could not seat more than twenty-five people at the table.

"What about the others?" Annushka demanded, frowning.

"They'll just have to wait!" Dubintsev announced firmly. "We're not a restaurant, after all."

"No, that won't do at all. You've simply got to think of something."

"But, what can I do, you funny girl?"

"You can do something. And I'm not funny. You could easily think of something if you really wanted to."

Observing that her lower lip had begun to tremble, Dubintsev hastily surrendered, promising to think of something even if it meant standing the tables one atop the other.

Annushka rewarded him with a smile that made her sweet little face with the tiny mole at the left temple light up with joy. After that she left in a great hurry, but she had hardly closed the door behind her when she knocked again like a schoolgirl and opening it a chink, so that only one mischievous eye was visible, whispered:

"Kolya darling, you're a genius!"

At four o'clock he was to have finished his work in the mine. The guests had been invited for eight. By two o'clock he had almost ceased worrying about Seam 31

where Derenkov was working, and had just mentioned the fact to Rogov, when a panting foreman overtook him in the stone-drift with the news that "the seam was acting funny."

Dubintsev swung round. "Where's Derenkov?"

"Needn't worry about him, he's in the drift," replied the foreman. "Says he's not going to throw away his life by going into a hole like that. Says the face is moving about as if it was alive."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" Dubintsev said indignantly. "How could you leave my seam in such a shape without trying to do something about it."

Dubintsev who had only recently been put in charge of the section had quite unconsciously fallen into the habit of using such expressions as "my section," "my seam," "my crew" which was his way of stressing his responsibility for the success of the work as a whole.

As the foreman had said, Derenkov was in the drift. He was calmly chatting with the girl trammer, leaning his elbow on the edge of the tram as if posing for his picture. Dubintsev felt a wave of anger sweep over him at the sight of this utter lack of concern.

He gave the miner a piece of his mind.

"What d'you expect me to do? Hold your blinking seam up with my shoulder?" Derenkov retorted. "Once she's started moving, nothing will stop her!"

"That's a fine attitude!" cried Dubintsev, clambering swiftly up the manhole. "I won't stand for it!"

But nobody heard those last few words because neither Derenkov nor the foreman followed him into the seam, and so neither of them saw what happened after that.

And what happened was this.

Dubintsev climbed slowly to the upper benches carefully examining the workings. As he had expected, they had not been timbered. That made him more furious still. "The swine! Criminal negligence! Look at that!" he said to himself. "Just you wait, we'll have something to say about this fine work of yours this evening! I told the ass to put in props as soon as the coal was out. But he was too busy making a record and raking in rubles."

The roof had settled visibly over the unpropped upper ledges, and several of the props had collapsed and splintered. But on the whole the situation did not look so bad. If the weak spots were timbered at once it might hold.

Dubintsev was about to shout down for assistance when he remembered that there ought to be some timber in the abandoned working above, and he crawled through a narrow little opening to the right. He did find a dozen or two props there half buried under rock and coal dust. He had paused for a moment to straighten his aching back when he felt a heavy blast of air strike him. For a fraction of a second the air seemed as solid as a wall. It swept him off his feet and he fell, striking his chin on a piece of timber and grazing his knees and palms on jagged bits of coal. His ears, eyes and mouth were filled with fine coal dust. A fearful rumbling shook the mine.

"Trapped!" He gasped and began spitting out the coal dust, his bruises forgotten for the moment.

A second later he was rushing to the opening through which he had come, but a sharp wedge of splintered timber stuck out from it through dark-brown chunks of rock like a warning finger.

"Trapped!" he gasped again, and not yet fully aware of what he was doing crawled swiftly over to the opposite side of the abandoned working.

When within three or four metres he bumped into a solid fall, he sat back and through twisted lips muttered, bewildered: "Groping about like a blind kitten. . . ."

From somewhere nearby came another dull roar, the sound rolled up from below and he felt rather than heard it. He concluded that the lower section of the seam had gone and he dropped down on the sloping floor feeling completely desolated.

"That's the end of the seam and me too! Nothing will help now." And he had only himself to blame. Would any other section chief have given in to Ocheredko? Would anyone in his senses have allowed such flagrant violation of the elementary rules of mining? What's more, he had had Rogov's support. Rogov had said definitely that he, Dubintsev, was right!

"Right!" Dubintsev spluttered scornfully. "To be in the right, to take the right stand was only half the battle, the main thing was to fight for what you knew to be right. And now it was too late to fight!"

His head drooped until it almost reached the stone floor and he sat thus, trying painfully to think of a way out of his terrible plight. Was there a way?

Minutes passed, each as long as an hour. Several times he crawled along the entire length of the fall only to return hopelessly to the starting point. There was no way out. His strength left him.

And suddenly in the silent oppressive darkness An-nushka's sweet little face, radiant with happiness, rose before him.

"You're the cleverest boy in the world, you're a genius!"

"Genius!" he made another attempt at irony, but a sharp pang of pity pierced his heart, pity for himself,

for Annushka whose happiness must wither at full bloom, for his comrades who were now attacking the fall with might and main and for whom it was harder now than for him because they did not know where he was and whether he was alive or not. They would search for him at the face, but that would mean working their way through thousands of tons of coal and rock, doing hundreds of metres of unnecessary tunnelling.

He wondered how they had taken the news of the accident, of the loss of one member of their big family, wondered how much time had passed since the seam collapsed.

Derenkov had, of course, reported the accident to the dispatching office at once, he thought.

He leaned back and tried to picture Annushka, but he could not.

Various episodes from his past rose before him in fantastic array. On faraway Karelian Isthmus the war with the Finnish Whites had just ended. Dubintsev and his schoolmate Goshka decided to go north in the spring. What did it matter if they were only fourteen: if you wanted to do big things in life you might as well start early. Who knew what discoveries they might one day present to their country? (How Annushka had laughed when he had told her about that attempt of his to become famous!) Nothing came of the northern expedition because their funds gave out at the first big railway junction.

In the winter of 1942 he had besieged the military commissariat for three weeks, but in spite of his innumerable applications and personal appeals they had refused to send him to the front. Instead he went to the Kuzbas where he attended a vocational training school and later enrolled in the mining school in Prokopyevsk. His father, a district agronomist, had heartily approved of his new calling.

That had been the beginning of his adult life. He suddenly woke up to the fact that he was a useful member of the mining community.

He recalled his first day in the mine. They gave him a pick to begin with. He hewed coal by hand.

"It isn't easy, but it'll help you to get the feel of the coal," said the foreman

After the first half hour his hands were completely numb; he stopped working, and settling himself comfortably against the rough wall of the coal ledge, dozed off. He awoke to find someone shaking his shoulder. An elderly miner was squatting beside him. Afterwards Dubintsev could never recall that incident without blushing with shame.

"What do you think you're doing?" the miner growled through clenched teeth. "What good is *your* college training if that's the best you can do? Here the country needs you, and you can't even keep up with an old man like me! I've been hewing coal for thirty years, and you cave in after half a shift. How do you expect to come here a year from now and teach me how to work? Now, listen, young man, you come over to my place this evening. I want to have a talk with you."

Dubintsev worked two shifts straight that day until he fulfilled his quota. When he returned to the hostel he exercised his right as the eldest in the room to give a dressing down to two of his fellow students who had failed to report for work in the pit because of a "belly-ache." After that he washed up, changed his clothes and set out to pay a visit to Uncle Yegor, as the stern old miner was called.

He was met at the door by a slim girl.

"I'm Annushka," she said offering him her hand

"Made friends already, eh?" said Uncle Yegor, who appeared in the hallway, tugging smilingly at his bushy whiskers. "Technicians, humph."

The following year Nikolai and Annushka studied in the same class. She was the only girl in the group and everyone liked her for her merry disposition and straightforward manner.

As lively as quicksilver, graceful, silvery-voiced!

When had they fallen in love with each other? It must have been at their very first meeting. At least so it was for him. And when had he told her about his love? Quite recently. Had it been hard to keep it to himself? No, he hadn't been aware of it, he had been so happy.

Dubintsev suddenly bethought himself of his lamp. He had forgotten to switch it off; he must make the battery last as long as possible.

The utter darkness pressed heavily on his eyelids and time seemed to stop completely. The coal dust gritted on his teeth. He was painfully conscious of thirst. But he thrust the desire from him, repeating over and over again: "Imagination!" But the desire persisted. Several times he fancied he heard the gurgling of a stream, or the plop-ping of drops. Unable to resist the impulse he switched on his lamp and crawled all over the working again and again until the last hope of finding a drop of moisture vanished.

For some reason the gloom seemed to grow more and more impenetrable with every hour and the silence to weigh ever more heavily on his heart. How many hours, minutes, days had passed since the accident?

He tried gauging the passage of time by counting the seconds: "twenty-one. . . twenty-two. . ." but he soon gave it up. What for? What did time matter now? What differ-

ence did it make whether he had been an hour, a day or a year in this foul hole? He was thirsty, hungry, chilled to the marrow. But all that would pass no doubt.

Presently he must have fallen asleep because for a long time he heard nothing, felt nothing and made no movement. A hollow silence reigned in the abandoned working. The only sounds in the stillness were the occasional rattle of a piece of coal rolling down from above or the creaking of a prop.

CHAPTER XIX

They stood for a while at the head of the crosscut. Bondarchuk sighed and swung his lamp.

"All right," he said. "You'd better go up to the office and do some work. I'll stay here. I'll give you a ring if anything turns up."

"Very well, I'll go," Rogov assented. "Think he's alive?" he asked.

"We've got to try and find him," Bondarchuk replied evasively.

Back in his office Rogov stood at his desk. He dared not sit down in his armchair for fear of falling asleep instantly. He had not slept for two nights and his head was ringing.

Paulina Ivanovna, the secretary-typist, came in. For some reason Rogov shrank from the grave, sorrowful eyes of this quiet, elderly woman. It seemed to him that behind the inconsolable grief in Paulina Ivanovna's eyes lurked a question no one could ever answer. He knew that her husband, an engineer, and her son who had graduated at the Irkutsk University just before the war, had been killed at the front.

For her part Paulina Ivanovna could not have told why this rather awkward man with his unfaltering gaze evoked such a wave of anxiety mingled with maternal tenderness in her. Perhaps it was because the day before, when he had entered the office for the first time in the capacity of pit manager, she had noticed him standing for a long while by the window looking as if he were trying to remember something long since forgotten. "It will be hard for him at first," she had thought. "And now this accident. . . ." She noticed his shoulders twitching as if under the weight of some unaccustomed load.

"Has anyone called from the trust?" Rogov asked, stifling a yawn in a way that made the corners of his mouth droop bitterly.

"Yes. There will be a conference there at six," Paulina Ivanovna answered. "Drobot looked in," she added after a moment's pause, "but he didn't say anything. District engineers Okhrimenko and Nefedov asked for an appointment. They said it was urgent."

Rogov drew up a list of appointments and told the secretary to summon the callers by turn. "I'm bound to fall asleep," he said to himself when Paulina Ivanovna went out; but he didn't sleep because the senior time-keeper came in to report that some of the workers underground were coming late for work. Together they drafted an order concerning checking in and out. When the time-keeper left, Loktyev, chief of surface operations, came complaining that he was badly in need of more workers.

"You will have to curb your extravagant wants!" Rogov cut him short. "I intended taking this up with you anyway."

Rubbing his fatigue-reddened eyes, he hunted up the entry in his notebook.

"By tomorrow evening you will turn over 230 of your 1,327 men for work underground, including all skilled inspection personnel and those with experience in work at the face."

The surface chief, who had a tendency to corpulence although still quite young, smiled.

"Pavel Gordeyevich, you misunderstood me. . . . It's not a cut in personnel I'm asking for. I need at least 150 men more!"

Rogov had picked up the receiver but now he dropped it carefully back on the hook.

"I understood you perfectly. Now you try and understand me. By tomorrow evening 230 men must be released for work in the pit."

Loktyev's face fell. He brought his feet smartly together under the chair.

"In that case I must warn you that I cannot be held responsible for the consequences."

"Very well," said Rogov. "You will turn over your duties to leading foreman Yekaterina Serbina by eight o'clock this evening. You may go!"

Loktyev walked across the room to the door on tip-toe. He put on his leather cap. Finally he turned round and said in a conciliatory tone:

"All right, I'll get together a hundred and fifty men for the pit sections by tomorrow evening . . . Pavel Gordeyevich!"

With a brief gesture Rogov called him over.

"Scared you?" Rogov asked as Loktyev resumed his seat with a sheepish grin.

"Gave me cold shivers down my spine!" the other confessed.

"Serves you right!" Rogov laughed "And now let's see what's what. And from now on, no more monkey business."

Half an hour later Bondarchuk telephoned. He suggested putting one more crew on clearing the fall.

"Try to arrange it as quickly as possible," he urged. "And here's another thing. The Cherepanov crew have flatly refused to leave the face and let another crew take over."

Bondarchuk was of the opinion that the Komsomol crew ought to be allowed to go on working, since they insisted, but suggested that some food be brought down to them from the canteen

"Forty-eight hours," said Rogov. "Slow work. The lad won't be able to hold out much longer. . . ." Then after a brief pause he repeated the question he had asked down in the pit: "Do you think he's still alive?"

Bondarchuk blew into the receiver.

"That is exactly what I wanted to ask you "

"All right," Rogov interrupted him "I'll send over a crew from District Three."

Filenkov came Rogov had been expecting him. He had anticipated this encounter, he had waited for this moment when he would look into this man's eyes and ask him the question so important for both of them: "Well, how is it going to be, Fyodor Lukich?" For unless they came to some understanding it would be impossible to work together.

But Filenkov acted very strangely as he entered the room. He took a long time closing the door, then with an air of almost scowling concentration he carefully smoothed down a corner of the carpet with the toe of his boot. He did not so much as glance in Rogov's direction

Finally he walked very quickly over to the desk, opened his folder and laid out some papers before the chief, and resting his outspread fingers on the edge of the table, appeared completely to efface himself. The expression on his face seemed to be saying: "I am not here. Before you are papers requiring your signature."

Rogov saw that Filenkov, who had taught himself to look at nearly everything through Drobot's eyes, had suddenly lost his bearings. And Rogov felt that he understood the chief engineer. As he signed the papers he thought grimly to himself: "You want to show that since Drobot is not here, neither is Rogov, and the chair is occupied by some managerial abstraction signing papers. And you have no feeling about it whatever. You are a bit of a coward and a little naive, chief engineer!" Accidentally blotting the last paper, Rogov raised his eyes to Filenkov.

"Fyodor Lukich, I have something to say to you."

"Yes?" Filenkov removed his hands from the desk.

"I have here a schedule for all kinds of conferences a pretty heavy schedule, I must say. Meetings of charwomen is all that appears to be missing. Couldn't it be cut at least by half?"

"But Pavel Gordeyevich!" Filenkov pulled himself up and, his lips twitching, seemed to be casting about for words. "Both the City Committee and the trust have approved that schedule, Pavel Gordeyevich!"

The word "approved" was uttered in an almost reverential whisper.

"Could you by any chance form an opinion of your own on the matter?" Rogov snapped back. "At once? You can? Excellent!"

The chief engineer's face seemed to brighten, and a good-humoured spark appeared in his eyes overshadowed

by greying brows. Almost relaxing as he leaned back in the chair, he said:

"I envy you, Pavel Gordeyevich, I really do!"

Rogov frowned.

The chief engineer made a placating gesture.

"Now don't misunderstand me . . . I'm telling you this with the best of intentions. I can't get over being sorry for Drobot, for he wasn't a bad worker once. . . But with you I feel much better, believe me. When you said yesterday that you would not have any commissions inspecting the mine without your permission, you were just echoing Drobot, but when you added that we should disregard the trust's appraisal of our output pace as satisfactory because nothing is worse than self-deception you were being your real self. And it is your real self that I like. And in general. . ."

"In general, Fyodor Lukich, tell me this," Rogov interrupted. "Are you interested in what you are doing? Your work . . . the future, I mean . . ."

"The future? Well . . . you see, you get so swamped by the daily routine, that. . ."

"That you're apt to forget about the future?"

"That's just it, you often do forget!"

"Perhaps you need a rest? We could arrange a vacation for you, send you to a health resort. . ."

Filenkov looked almost horrified at the suggestion.

"What are you talking about, Pavel Gordeyevich! You offend me by such proposals. Wait, you'll see how I can work. . . I'll prove it to you."

His face looked suddenly drawn, the gleam in his eyes faded, and he walked out of the room with his arms hanging limp at his sides.

Rogov suddenly remembered what Voshchin had said.

"You may not believe it, Pavel Gordeyevich, but that man has a spark in him, only it's been smothered with ashes. Give it a little breeze and it'll flare up for certain."

Rogov was about to call Filenkov back when Nefedov came rushing in.

"Is this a hoax, Pavel Gordeyevich?" he shouted from the doorway. "They're taking my best crew away from me! Why, I'll. . ."

"We've got to get the lad out, haven't we?" Rogov stopped him sternly.

Nefedov quieted down at once.

"That was just for the sake of form. . . The crew's gone off already. But," and he raised his voice again, "tell me the truth, Pavel Gordeyevich, what has the chief mechanic got against my district? They filched one hundred and twenty metres of transporter belt from me today again."

"I'll tell them to give it back to you," Rogov said. "But only on one condition that the automatic loader begins operating tomorrow in Section Two. Is it a bargain?"

"Tomorrow?" Nefedov's features relaxed in a smile which gave his face the customary gentle look that suited him far more than the hard, stubborn expression he had assumed. Leaning lightly on the table, he inquired sympathetically. "Well, Pavel Gordeyevich, how does it feel on the new job? Tough, eh?"

"The job's the same as before. . ."

"Yes, but what I mean is, the duties. . ."

Rogov did not quite know himself whether it was hard for him or not. He had had no time to think about it. He had been too preoccupied with the job of getting Dubintsev

out. The very thought that in the rush, or simply owing to inexperience, he might overlook something, might neglect some urgent measures or fail to find the shortest way to rescue his comrade, appalled him. Nor was it much consolation that the manager of the trust who had come down to the mine had approved of all the rescue operations. He kept asking himself what else could be done to save Dubintsev, but could find no answer. Perhaps that was why he was so glad when he heard Danilov's voice in the receiver. Before the other had time to say a word, Rogov insisted that he hurry over to the pit at once.

"I was coming over anyway. With a complaint!"

He presented his complaint as soon as he had entered Rogov's office and closed the door tightly behind him.

"You've got big doings on here, Pavel Gordeyevich, he began hurriedly, taking a seat opposite Rogov. "I've been told you're launching an offensive in the mine, and you go and keep me hanging around in the baggage train for a whole week. That's not the way we guardsmen do things. It turns out you've got a whole crew down in the pit named after. . . named . . ."

"The Danilov crew you mean?"

"Yes, that's the one . . . And you didn't say a word about it to me. That wasn't nice of you."

"Wait a minute!" Rogov stopped him. "I have an offer to make you: I need a good, energetic lad in the personnel department."

"What? Me, work in an office!" Danilov flared up. "I never thought you'd do a thing like that to me, Pavel Gordeyevich!"

"Wait, now, wait!"

"I won't wait! Where's my crew?"

Rogov said nothing, for he agreed in advance to all the arguments his comrade could put forward.

"The crew is busy with rescue work, Stepan. One of our lads is buried under a fall. A young technician. We've got to get him out."

"Buried? And the crew is fighting to get him out?" Danilov's eyes grew moist with excitement. He sprang up as if ready to run off, but instead he begged almost in a whisper. "Pavel Gordeyevich, I want to be on that crew."

"All right, run along and get started. I'll attend to the rest."

When Danilov had gone off to get his work outfit, Rogov called down to Bondarchuk in the pit.

"Remember me telling you about Danilov? He's coming down to join Cherepanov's crew. He's going to work with them. Good, isn't it? He's one of those who fought all the way to Berlin. Give him a hand down there, will you?"

Rogov spent an hour and a half at the dispatching office attending to the placing of the second shift, and when he came back he found Annushka waiting for him. He both feared and welcomed this meeting, for he wanted to do what he could to help her. He had tried to get in touch with her by telep. one, but had been told that she had gone to the trust about the plans and estimates for the projected auxiliary shaft.

So she was busy at work! Rogov was very much impressed.

"Good girl, she's bearing up splendidly," he reflected.

Now Annushka was sitting on the window sill, her slim shoulders etched against the bluish background of the window. They shook hands and began at once to consider the matter of whether it would be better to wait

until the development people began driving the auxiliary shaft, or undertake the job themselves. But where were they to get the workers?

Annushka was silent for a while. Rogov too waited, unable to bring himself to change the subject.

"I'm a technician, after all," the girl said at length. "A technician, Pavel Gordeyevich!"

"Yes?" he asked, puzzled.

"A mining technician!" she repeated insistently. "And here I am working as a draughtsman. I'm sick of it, Pavel Gordeyevich. . . ."

"I understand. . . ."

"Couldn't you put me on the auxiliary shaft . . . Couldn't you?"

"Annushka, that's a splendid idea. . . ."

Rogov stepped forward quickly from behind his desk but stopped short at the unutterable pain that stared out of the girl's eyes. She turned away, her quivering chin pressed to her shoulder, then she rose, but instead of rushing to the door, she hid her face against Rogov's chest. For a few minutes he stood, not daring to move a muscle. The nearness and bitterness of this grief was almost more than he could bear.

CHAPTER XX

The second day of rescue work was drawing to a close. Rogov had signed the report sheet for the shift and sent it off to the trust, and now he and Bondarchuk sat opposite each other in silence. Then the Party organizer rose with an impulsive movement and bent over the plan of the section where the accident had happened, as he had done so many times before during the past two days.

The next minute he banged his fist on the table. Rogov was startled.

"What's up?"

"Bunglers, that's what we are!" Bondarchuk broke a match in the act of striking it. "Bunglers. Get the old-timers up here, those who know the upper level. Quickly!"

"Another council?"

"Yes, another one. And we'll call twenty more if need be."

Rogov said nothing but summoned the miners for two o'clock. Voshchin, Khmelchenko, Nekrasov and six other old-timers came.

Rogov gave them a brief outline of the progress of the rescue work and asked what the comrades thought about it and whether they could suggest anything else that might be done.

For a moment silence reigned in the office. Someone sighed, someone else coughed.

"The old shaft was examined last time," Khmelchenko finally said. "It's so clogged up that it would take a week to clear the vertical part alone."

Outside in the anteroom there was a commotion. Paulina Ivanovna looked in at the door.

"What's the trouble?" Rogov inquired.

"There's a miner here asking to see you. . . . Something urgent, he says."

"Tell him to see the engineer on duty in the pit. I've told you that before!"

But the next minute Mitenka had squirmed in under Paulina Ivanovna's elbow. Despite his haste the lad had obviously taken the trouble to get washed before coming. The washing had been perfunctory, for only his nose, lips and cheeks were more or less clean, the

rest of his face was covered with a thick layer of coal dust.

Mitenka was taken aback by the sight of so many people. He was about to step forward to the desk when he met Rogov's eye and halted, tore off his rust-stained helmet and smoothed down his ruffled hair.

"I have a conference at the moment," said Rogov.

"I . . . er . . . I've come to the conference, Pavel Gordeyevich."

Mitenka backed to a chair and seated himself on the very edge so as not to soil the upholstery.

Bondarchuk looked from the young miner to the chief with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"Fire away then," said Rogov.

"I was sent up to the surface to get some tools sharpened," he said rising to his feet.

"Go on."

"Don't drag it out," Khmelchenko cleared his throat impatiently and surveyed the gathering apologetically as if he were to blame for the lad's faltering speech.

"I'm not dragging it out," the young man swallowed nervously. "I looked down and there was a hole that big!" he made a gesture with his hands to show how big. "I knew it wasn't there yesterday so I thought I'd take a look. I dived in. And sure enough. . . ."

Rogov and Bondarchuk sprang up with one accord.

One of the miners dragged Mitenka over to the desk. Everyone began talking at once. Rogov raised his hands.

"Quiet, comrades!" And turning to Mitenka: "And now let's have the story from the beginning."

Mitenka passed his tongue nervously over his dry lips and began to give a more coherent account of his discovery.

A half an hour later Khmelchenko, Voshchin and Nekrasov were down at the old shaft with Rogov and Mitenka. Rescue work was started at once in the new spot.

By the end of the second day Dubintsev had lost all sense of time, but by the way his strength was gradually ebbing and his movements slowing down he knew that many hours had passed. What a pity he had lost so much time at the beginning in stupid dreaming. But had it really been a dream? He did not know, and he was too preoccupied to really care. Had anyone asked him how he felt at that moment, he would hardly have known what to say. He only knew that he was fighting for his life, fighting for a chance to walk the earth, to be with his own kind, to feel that people needed him!

He had forced himself to work in the inky blackness, switching on his lamp only for brief moments to get his bearings.

He was conscious of nothing now but a grim determination to break through to light, to life. There was that determination, and there were his hands.

Using a piece of a splintered prop he was digging his way through the fallen rock and coal, digging upward, guided by a faint, barely perceptible current of air. Several times he had wandered off this invisible path, but had doggedly found his way back again. It had taken him a long time to work his way around a coal pillar that barred his way. His torn hands hurt, his whole body ached from knocking against the sharp edges of rock in the darkness, but after pausing for no more than five minutes he would leap up with something like a groan and hurl himself on the fall again. For about two metres from the coal pillar it

was practically smooth going, for at this spot the roof held securely. But after that it got worse. Once he even lost consciousness for a while, and he lay with his face buried in his aching arms. Through the oblivion he heard someone moaning beside him, uttering now brief moans that were more like sighs, now long, high-pitched cries. He caught his breath to listen. No, everything was quiet. But the moment he closed his eyes, it started again. It was some time before he realized that it was he who was moaning.

He had discarded his sweater and canvas jacket long since. And now he regretted it, for the wearier he became the colder he felt. A chill shook his whole body. He decided to climb back down and look for his clothes. He had already passed the coal pillar and advanced another three metres further when he struck a pile of rock. He ran his hands over it in the dark—no exit. He switched on his lamp. No exit! So he had been cut off from the working too. He sat for a while breathing into the unbuttoned collar of his shirt for warmth. A narrow crooked burrow a few metres long was all he had left. And no one knew how many metres of fallen rock and coal there was in front of him. His arms ached. His head felt unnaturally light. Everything swam dizzily around him.

When he came to he found himself lying in the upper section of the burrow, his head in a narrow crevice and his hands clinging tightly to a large piece of splintered pit prop.

His dizziness had passed. Something inside him seemed to have tautened, strengthened, matured—he no longer hurled himself recklessly forward, no longer beat himself against the pile of rock. Calmness had taken possession of him. In that calmness was all that he had

learned in his young life, all that the great Party of Lenin and Stalin had taught him: Fight! Think! Know!

He had become sparing of his movements, his hands actually seemed to see in the dark. And when he again began to make more rapid headway, he did not dash himself against the fall, but continued cautiously and unhurriedly to work his way forward for another few metres.

He was making his way through soft dry clay now. It fell apart easily. If only his hands didn't ache so much. His poor hands, they were refusing to obey him. When finally they could move no longer, he began to dig at the clay with his elbows, with his chin even, losing consciousness again and again. Phantoms passed before his open eyes in the impenetrable blackness.

"Now, it's time to be going!" Annushka was saying. "Look, it's already half past seven!"

But she came along with him herself and held his hand in her little hot palms all the way. At the entrance to the Party Bureau she inquired anxiously:

"Are you sure you are quite calm? Sure your conscience is clear?"

Yes, his conscience was clear, and he was almost calm, except for that curious throbbing, rapid and heavy, in his throat and the hot waves that kept rushing to his face.

Now he was coming out of the Party Bureau, and again Annushka took his arm.

"Well? How was it! Tell me quickly!"

Dubintsev looked at the brightly lit windows of the Party Bureau office, at the indigo sky studded with stars, and at Annushka, and sighed happily:

"Accepted! 'Go,' they said, 'work and study—you're a member of the Communist Party now!'"

... And again and again he burrowed through the clay, through the chunks of rock. At one point a bit of the unstable roof caved in and buried his legs. "No!" he said with a fierce laugh, "I'm not going to leave my legs here!"

Long and exhausting hours passed before he freed his numb limbs. Afterwards he rested, or thought he rested. Then he pressed forward with his whole body. . . . Suddenly his face, chest and hands were swept by a fresh current of air. For a moment he was unable to appreciate the significance of what had happened, but when the clay in front of him gave easily and dropped with a dull patter into some sort of opening, his whole body was shaken with sobs of deep, utter relief.

He had barely taken more than two deep breaths of fresh air when a blinding, searing light struck his eyes and several strong hands caught him by the neck and shoulders.

"Nikolai Victorovich! Are you all right?" Rogov picked up Dubintsev's limp, exhausted body.

Someone brought a lamp close to his face, someone gently pressed his hand. It seemed that hundreds of people were crowded into the narrow working.

Nikolai's lips moved soundlessly but the words would not come and his head dropped weakly against Rogov's chest. But when they had reached the surface he suddenly opened his eyes, staggered to his feet, straightened up and took one step, then another.

"Look!" cried Mitenka unable to contain himself with joy. "He's walking!"

The news of Dubintsev's rescue swept the pit with incredible speed. All those who were not working hurried to the office. While he waited for the doctor to come, Dubintsev sat another fifteen minutes in Rogov's office.

Paulina Ivanovna looked in several times, closing the door gently behind her. She was about to call the hospital for the third time when Annushka burst into the outer office—a tight-lipped Annushka with dilated staring eyes, her coat unbuttoned, her head bare and her breath coming in short gasps. She tore her hand off the door handle as if it were red-hot.

"Alive!" she breathed.

... The following evening Annushka took Dubintsev home from the hospital. His hands were still weak and burning hot. Fluffy white snow lay on the ground in the shady spots. They walked along in silence. Only once Annushka said softly: "Kolya, you're with me again!"

When they reached Nikolai's place she hurriedly took off her coat.

"You've got fever," she said in a worried tone. "I'm going to call the doctor at once."

"Annushka, I shan't manage without you..." Nikolai pleaded timidly.

"I'm not going away from you any more!" she declared then and there. "Hear that? I'm not going"

"That means..."

"It doesn't mean anything!" Annushka turned away to hide the blush that rose to her cheeks. "Get to bed at once and keep still. And... in general! If that's the sort of man you are..."

Nikolai's head sank back against the soft pillow and he closed his eyes. Annushka sat down beside him and ran her fingers lightly over his forehead. He fell asleep almost instantly. It was dusk when he awoke. The room was in semidarkness. The lights had not been turned on. Annushka was still beside him, and all over the room—some standing by the wall, some on chairs, some crowded

on the trunk and some sitting straight on the floor—were the Cherepanov boys. As Nikolai opened his eyes they all waved to him and nodded.

"Hush, don't talk!"

"If you only knew how I wanted to live," Nikolai said, as if continuing a conversation that had been broken off. "I thought it was all up for a time, but then I came to and it was pitch dark and quiet and suffocating—like being buried alive. And with nothing accomplished yet, and you left all alone, Annushka. It hurt. Then I got to thinking about the boys. . . . Wonderful fellows! And what miners! Come over here, Mitenka, and sit beside me."

Mitenka came over and sat on the edge of the bed.

"You're a real friend . . . I know it was you who. . ." Dubintsev fell silent. Then, his eyes still closed, he sought Annushka's hand, pressed it against his cheek, and said slowly: "Gosh, but I was lonesome for you!"

Then he lapsed into silence and soon he was asleep, his face pressed against Annushka's palm.

CHAPTER XXI

Voronov, the Secretary of the City Committee of the Party, usually gave advance intimation of his intention to visit the pit. But today he arrived without warning.

Rogov and Filenkov had just begun to look over the new working schedules when the man on duty announced that the Secretary was in the pit. He had been at Section 17 a moment ago, but had gone on somewhere else, the man could not say exactly where.

Section 17, incidentally, was the toughest in the mine. The coal was of high quality, but the rock around made it hard to work. The strata both top and bottom

had a tendency to heave, and there was a very substantial influx of water. Section 17 gave the mine management nearly as much trouble as all the other sections taken together.

Rogov told Filenkov to carry on by himself and hurried down to the bottom level.

Ivan Leonidovich Voronov was a Siberian born and bred. After graduating from the mining institute he had worked in the Far East for a number of years as director of a coal trust and later had been transferred to the Kuzbas in the capacity of a Party functionary.

"Ivan Leonidovich?" the chief of Section 17 echoed in reply to Rogov's query "He left here about five minutes ago."

"You might have accompanied the City Committee Secretary," Rogov remarked with displeasure.

"I tried to," the technician said with a laugh. "But you know him, he feels quite at home here. Just waved me aside."

"He was in the dispatching office," the transport foreman reported.

The dispatcher only shrugged his shoulders.

"Ivan Leonidovich left us today's paper, advised me to tell you that the timbering wasn't being done properly on the third main seam and hurried off."

Giving up hope of finding the Secretary, Rogov dropped into Voshchin's drift, and there was Voronov. He was standing beside Voshchin who was bent over the transporter belt of the rock loader.

"Do you happen to know how many subscribers to *Pravda* there are at the Kapitla'naya, Pavel Gordeyevich?" he asked as soon as he saw Rogov.

"Subscribers to *Pravda*?" Rogov was somewhat taken aback by the question. "You'll have to ask Bondarchuk, Ivan Leonidovich. He'd know."

"I see," Voronov said, walking around the machine until he was again next to the mine chief. "I see you observe a strict division of functions. Well, that's all right. . . . You're probably wondering what I'm getting at. You see, I've been going around asking people whether they'd read the Karaganda miners' letter to Comrade Stalin. Some say they've read it, but most have only vaguely heard about it. Perhaps you haven't read it either?"

"I have."

"Well, that's better," remarked Voronov. Then he turned back to Voshchin.

Voshchin straightened up. "I think it'll work all right," he said.

"Misbehaving?" Rogov asked the miner.

"Giving a bit of trouble," Voshchin replied with a sigh. "It's a good machine, but if you ask me, the factory that made it slipped up on something. I'm thinking of gearing it up to a higher speed, but it has a tendency to get jammed." Then with a sharp look at Voronov, he added: "Comrade Voronov, don't you think it's time we wrote to Joseph Vissarionovich ourselves?"

"But have we anything to write about?" Voronov asked with a glance at Rogov.

"We're bound to have since we're working in the Kuzbas," was Voshchin's rejoinder. "Of course, he knows very well all about what we're doing, but wouldn't it be good to put it to him in our own simple words, tell him how things are progressing here in Siberia, how we're spreading out and forging ahead all the time!"

"Not a bad idea," the Secretary concurred. "But we'll have to think it all over carefully first, and then get together and decide how to write it."

"Did you hear that?" Voronov remarked to Rogov as they left Voshchin's heading. "A simple miner, yet see what thoughts possess him. Why, he even takes the engineers' mistakes to heart—you heard what he said: they'd slipped up on something. And now he wants to share his thoughts and his hopes with our leader. You ought to learn from men like him."

"We learn from one another," Rogov said.

"That's right too," Ivan Leonidovich agreed. "But I must tell you that it is not easy to learn from the people, you have to be a real Bolshevik for that. Only Bolsheviks can without false humility draw from the wisdom of the people that which is most vital and essential and return it to the people enriched by our great revolutionary teaching. You oughtn't to forget that."

It was not until they had reached the office and Voronov had been sitting for a few minutes on the sofa in the corner that Rogov said: "I am not forgetting it, Ivan Leonidovich!"

"Indeed?" Voronov murmured in mock surprise. He got up and paced the room, his lips moving soundlessly, his hands touching in passing the telephone, or the back of a chair, or the bindings of the books on the stand, as if testing the soundness of everything. Presently he paused by the window and peering through the screen of autumn drizzle into the misty panorama of mine structures, he inquired: "What's that work going on there beyond the coal piles?"

"We're putting up a fence around the pit," Rogov replied.

"Bit too high, isn't it?"

"Why do you think so?" Rogov looked puzzled. "An ordinary three-metre fence. We've got to take care of the pit property, haven't we?"

"Aren't you afraid you'll be fencing yourself off from the rest of the Kuzbas?"

"Fencing myself off from the Kuzbas?" The engineer laughed. "That's impossible, Ivan Leonidovich. I can see the Kuzbas even through the Kondoma hills!"

"Wait, don't get excited," Voronov stopped him. Settling himself in an armchair, he continued: "Please don't take this for a simple geography lesson. My question about the Kuzbas had a direct bearing on what I said about knowing how to learn from the people."

Rogov looked at Voronov with heightened interest.

"Yes, that's just the point," the Secretary said with emphasis. "Voshchin is initiating a fine thing: high-speed drift-driving. Why don't you give him room to spread out, why are you sitting on his method like broodhens, letting no one near it?"

Rogov sprang up, but Voronov waved him back again.

"You're going to tell me that Afanası Petrovich is spending most of his time at other faces as it is? Right you are. But what about the other pits in the coal field, what about the rest of the Kuzbas? Have you thought about that? You did? Strange. In that case, you should write an article at once for the regional paper—that's number one; secondly, speak to your professor of high-speed drift-driving, Voshchin senior, give him a car and let him visit all the pits of the trust and tell them how he does it. And without delay, mind."

Rogov thought it over and agreed it was the right thing to do. He said that he would see to it.

"Ivan Leonidovich," he asked, "what's your impression of the situation in the pit as a whole?"

"I had a look at the way you have placed your forces on the sector of the main blow—that is how you formulate your task, isn't it?"

"It is."

"I thought so. Now the production cycle. As far as I understand, the production cycle is a combination of mechanization and a new, more efficient organization of work. Right? I looked in at Sections Five and Seven—I liked what I saw—that's the real thing, good, efficient work. But... Yes, another 'but.' Aren't you forgetting that in elevating coal output to a higher plane, you are doing so together with the entire collective of miners? After all, when you mechanize coal hewing you are mechanizing the labour of men, and you can't do much there just by administrative pressure or engineering knowledge. Can you? What do you say?"

At that moment Bondarchuk entered and Rogov had no chance to reply.

"Sit down, both of you, opposite me," Voronov proposed. "That's right. And now listen. Why do you think I have interrupted your work here today?"

Bondarchuk and Rogov exchanged glances. Voronov looked at both of them closely.

"I was given the decision of the all-Union jury of the competition among coal miners today," he said in a low voice. His eyes had grown stern, his features hardened. "The Ministry's challenge banner will be taken away from you and given to the Voroshilov mine in Prokopyevsk."

The Party organizer raised his head with a slow, stubborn movement and looked at the Secretary, then swiftly at Rogov.

"Tell me," Voronov fired the question, "could you have kept the banner?"

"No!" snapped Bondarchuk.

"Why not?" Rogov disagreed. "If we had kept to Drobot's methods we'd have held on to it for another month."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Voronov's dark straight eyebrows knitted ever so slightly.

"This is what I mean," said Rogov incisively, his fists pressed against the arms of the chair. "Kapitalnaya and its workers can and must be exemplary, strong. They must be capable tomorrow . . . today, if you like, of tackling tasks set for the end of the five-year plan period. But for this we have had to put the workings in order, repair the equipment, get training going. Yes, we have had to hurl all our forces, all our means to the sector of the main blow. We were looking a long way ahead!"

"Yes, and you overlooked the present!" Voronov put in. "Now, you aren't children, I am certain you will think it over and work it all out for yourselves. But mind you make a clean breast of it to the miners. Tell them briefly and clearly why the banner had to be relinquished in spite of the fact that a bottleneck like Drobot had been eliminated, and in spite of the fact that the workers now have a chance to get things done."

Voronov rose.

"Think it over," he said as he was taking his leave. "But be honest with yourselves. And don't wait for me to take you by the hand and lead you to the workers to explain yourselves."

The Secretary left. A minute passed. Bondarchuk lifted his eyes to Rogov.

"Very well," said Rogov, squaring his shoulders. "Let's think it over honestly!"

CHAPTER XXII

A day passed, however, before Rogov was able to talk things over with Bondarchuk, for he was busy until late at night on the details of the work schedule with Filenkov, and the Party organizer spent the day at the trust.

On his return Bondarchuk went straight to Rogov's office. Stopping in the middle of the room, he eyed Rogov angrily.

"Do you know what the trust technical department chief told me today?" he said. "'A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.'"

"And what did you say?"

"Told him I didn't care much for any of his birds. In other words, we quarrelled."

Bondarchuk wiped his high, prominent forehead.

"What do you think Ivan Leonidovich hinted at yesterday when he told us to think for ourselves and not wait for him to lead us by the hand?"

Rogov shrugged his shoulders.

"He hinted at a great many things...."

"I don't think so. Now look around you; the whole room is flooded with light but the sun strikes only the desk or that bookcase over there. That's how it was with the Secretary—he was probably hinting at a lot of things, but he had one concrete thing in mind first and foremost: he wanted to say that to work with a collective means to consult with it, to lay all your cards on the table. But we've been too busy to do that. We've lost touch with the collective to some extent. If we hadn't, we'd have pulled through."

"That's true enough," said Rogov. "But since we're aware of it...."

"... there's no use singing funeral dirges, is that it?" Bondarchuk interrupted him. "Of course we shan't. But it hurts just the same. Coming past the club room a few minutes ago I saw a crowd of miners gathered there. Before I had time to ask them what it was all about one of the miners said: 'Come right in, Comrade Party organizer, it won't do you any harm either to remember this moment.'"

"The men were looking on in silence as the trade union organizer of Section 17 removed the challenge banner from its case. It hurt, but still I couldn't help feeling happy."

"Happy?" Rogov was surprised.

"Exactly. It was painful to realize that you and I had not succeeded in leading the collective out of Drobot's backwaters without a setback as substantial as the loss of the banner, but I was happy to see what splendid people we have to work with. Really splendid people!"

"Soviet people!"

"Yes, that's it!" said Bondarchuk and then continued in a calmer tone: "I would advise you to give some careful thought to how you are going to give an account of your actions to them. You must do it without whining. From the outset you've got to scotch all theorizing about immediate and long-range plans—all that is nonsense. The Party has given us clear-cut instructions: to carry out the plan without fail and thereby lay the ground for expansion tomorrow. There is no other way!"

Rogov nodded. He had a curious impulse to tell Bondarchuk how hard he had been thinking these last few weeks, how many sleepless nights he had spent—to tell him that never had he lived a fuller life, never been more at ease with his conscience. Difficulties? Of course there were difficulties!

Rarely did he fall asleep at night without thinking of some important thing he had not had time to accomplish that day. But what did difficulties and worries matter, so long as you knew that you always had the men pulling together with you, and that you were living in the morrow. Yesterday the statistician on duty entered the figure 102.1 per cent on the daily output index board. It was nothing extraordinary, yet the day before it had been 102, without the point one per cent. This decimal point was a living, animate thing to Rogov; he knew whence it sprang, how much labour and fervent searching had gone into its making. During the day the Komsomol members in Dubintsev's section had hewn three times more than had been expected and might have done more—in the end Cherepanov himself had come up to complain that he was not being given a chance to do his best. Voshchin's son Grigori also had come to ask apologetically that he be given five faces of preparatory workings to take care of, promising to hand in a time schedule he had worked out on the basis of the multiface method. Of course, Ivan Leonidovich had been right in implying yesterday (although he had not put it in so many words) that Rogov and Bondarchuk were 'to blame for not having been able to reorganize the work and ensure overfulfilment of the plan at the same time. Yet there were untapped forces—they were bursting forth at the mine like fresh springs. What had to be done was to organize things so that these springs could merge into one mighty stream capable of sweeping away every obstacle in its path. Was that not why he often went to sleep at night with the disquieting thought that something very important had been left undone that day?

Rogov said nothing of all this to Bondarchuk at the moment; he was making ready for the coming meeting. Bondarchuk kept pacing restlessly up and down.

"So now you know what to say about that 'bird in the hand.'"

"For goodness' sake stop worrying about those birds," Rogov said impatiently.

"That's all very well, but the two in the bush almost settled down right here at the mine."

"You mean...."

"That's right."

"Almost," Rogov echoed. He rose and went toward the door. "We can be thankful that there is no room for 'almosts' in our life. A word to the wise...."

Half an hour later they went to the meeting. Rogov was deeply stirred by the sight of the crowded hall - all the seats were taken and there was not even any standing room

"It's hit them all hard," thought Rogov "But that only makes us all the stronger!"

Surveying the hundreds of men, kindred to him in spirit, looking at this sea of faces now so stern, and reading in the eyes of each a lofty dignity and resolution, Rogov felt more keenly than ever how greatly he had wronged them by doubting their powers, their readiness for labour exploits. The caution he had displayed in preparing them for all-round mechanization was a slight to them. They were quite capable of handling any machine and of turning out as much coal as they had always done....

"What a force they are!" he thought.

"You'd better begin," the Party organizer prodded him when they had taken their places on the platform. "But no whining, mind!" he reminded Rogov again.

Rogov had no intention to whine. Straining against a curious heaviness that weighted his whole body, he walked to the rostrum.

"There is a stern but just law in wartime. . ." he began calmly.

"Skip the war—don't try to throw dust in our eyes!" came a hostile voice from the audience. "What about the banner we've lost?"

"Fine managers we've got!"

"There is a law in wartime," Rogov repeated, speaking more slowly, but unruffled by the heckling, "according to which an army unit that loses its colours in battle is disbanded. We too have lost our banner in the battle for the plan; the difference is that we are not in the firing lines. Do not think, comrades, that this is just speech-making. I have given this a great deal of thought, and here is what I wanted to tell you today. It is good there are miners in the Kuzbas who work better than we do, for that means we have someone to support us in our march into the morrow, someone to emulate. We must all of us, and that applies particularly to myself and the entire management, strive to measure up to them. It is a bad thing when workers do not respect the executives, but it is still worse when the executives do not learn from the workers. To learn from the workers means believing in the powers of the collective, and those powers are tremendous!"

Rogov's eyes swept over the meeting as he repeated: "Tremendous!"

A murmur of approval rippled over the gathering.

"Emulation today," Rogov went on, "is governed by its own standards and laws. I want to read to you what they write us from the Voroshilov pit which won the banner from us: 'We are glad to have gained the lead over

such a strong "opponent" as you, comrades. But we have heard that you are still having trouble with all-round mechanization, and that has given us cause for concern. We have decided to send a crew of Stakhanovites and engineers to your pit for a week—they will show you how we are going about this matter. Don't take it amiss—we are only too glad to share our experience with you. Let us join forces, comrades, for the second year of the five-year plan is under way! Kuzbas is gathering speed, we must keep an eye on our neighbours and help them. Otherwise we shall not be able to carry out our common task.'

"Let us join forces, comrades!" Rogov surveyed the silent assembly. "There you have the new element in our life! Its name is communism!"

A deep, solemn hush reigned in the hall. In the first row sat Cherepanov's crew, pressed close together. Mitenka's round, ruddy face was turned up, his wide-open eyes glued on the speaker and lips framing the words just uttered. Sibirtsev, his square, close-cropped head bent, was scratching a pattern on the cement floor with a switch.

"Yes, much has still to be done before the Kapitalnaya can make a resolute spurt ahead. We all know that. And yet we have never felt as confident as we do at this moment, never more keenly conscious of our ties with the future of the whole Kuzbas and the entire country!"

What Rogov had wanted to say to Bondarchuk alone a half an hour before, he now found himself saying to the entire collective. The words, good, warm words, came of themselves, and the facts he wanted revived in his memory with effortless ease

"The banner will come back to our pit! Begging the pardon of the comrades from Prokopyevsk, let no one

think that the collective of the Kapitalnaya has thrown up the sponge."

Sayenog nudged Sibirtsev who looked at him from the corner of his bulging brown eyes and nodded. Of course! If the pit shipped out ten extra carloads of coal tomorrow one more tractor would throb in the fields of Sibirtsev's native Kulunda steppe in the spring, adding to the boundless expanses of heavy-eared grain stirred by blue-tinted wind ripples sweeping to the very horizon. Or, perhaps, Sibirtsev's above-plan coal would go to heat some scientist's study, or to light the room in the Kremlin where Stalin sat pondering the future of the country.

Together with the rest Sibirtsev clapped his hands vigorously and levelled an almost defiant look at the little grey-haired old man who was one of the delegates from the victor-pit.

Rogov, his face somewhat pale, sat down beside Bondarchuk and whispered as if in apology:

"I'm afraid I ran away with myself. . ."

The Party organizer's expression was almost tender as he looked searchingly at Rogov.

"You've got that spark in you. . ." he was saying "You ought to be a Party worker, Pavell"

Rogov nodded, somewhat puzzled by the remark "I always regard myself as a Party worker."

Old Voshchin climbed on to the stage with the banner. His keen eyes swept the meeting, and he nodded his head, evidently in answer to some unspoken thought. Then he began to speak in a low voice, leaning forward, his feet slightly apart.

"I was going to make a regular speech," he said, sighing, "but I've changed my mind Pavel Gordeyevich has already said everything. Now, don't forget what he

said!" his voice rose and once more his stern glance surveyed the audience. He bent over, picked up the edge of the velvet banner and kissed it, then with an abrupt movement thrust the painted pole into the hands of the little grey-haired man from Prokopyevsk. "Take it, comrade. You've earned it!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Rogov realized that Valya must be giving all her time and energy to her candidate's thesis, but this did not make things easier for him. Occasionally he seemed to detect a note of uneasiness in her letters, as if she were still debating the matter in her mind. "The thesis is all well and good," they seemed to say, "but what will happen after that? Shall I come to you at the mine? What shall I do there when the expanses of Siberia and new discoveries hold such irresistible attraction for me? What are we to do?"

That morning Rogov, no longer able to restrain himself, had written to her. "There is more reason than feeling in your attitude to me," he wrote. "Can't you understand how much I need you?"

But no sooner had he mailed the letter than he regretted his impulsive action; as a matter of fact, it had bothered him all day. It had been a rather childish thing to do. And in general it was silly to lose one's self-possession for no good reason. Everything would straighten out in time. All day long these thoughts had beset him, so that the summons to attend a meeting of the City Party Committee that evening came as a welcome relief.

The meeting was called for six o'clock, but Rogov came considerably earlier. The men who gathered in Vo-

ronov's office brought to the little room with the green-tinted walls the mighty breath of the pits—the calm wisdom of the people, the skill of miners, the experience of executives. Here were decided the most difficult and pressing issues posed by the life of the mines and whatever the question each one present felt himself caught up and borne along by the swift stream of urgent tasks.

But this time Rogov found it difficult to concentrate on what was going on. Bondarchuk had to nudge his elbow before he was aware that a question had been addressed to him.

He looked up to find the Secretary regarding him expectantly.

"We were considering what would be the best way of organizing an exchange of experience among the junior mine inspectors, and about emulation within the different trades."

"Emulation . . ." Rogov thought for a moment. "What shall I say about emulation? We lost the banner to the Prokopyevsk mine."

Remennikov, chief of Pit No. 10, laughed.

"Never mind, Rogov, that's not the sort of experience you're supposed to share!"

"Why not?" Rogov objected. "We've learned a lot from that experience. What I want to say is that from now on we shall not only try to get ahead of the Voroshilov mine which has outstripped us now. We've almost caught up with them already. Next year we shall begin solving problems two years in advance. Am I right?" he asked turning to Bondarchuk. "As for the mine inspectors, all the mine foremen are to go through a course of training in the first quarter. We can't allow a situation where

the shift foreman has no right to take responsibility. Ocheredko's case speaks for itself. That's what comes of thoughtless promotion—the man will have to face trial now. Well, there you have the main points to start from, Ivan Leonidovich. . . .”

Voronov nodded. Then he turned to the men from Pit No. 4, and a few minutes later he was firing questions at the chief engineer of No. 9.

Listening to the Secretary, Rogov admired the ease with which he seized upon the most important idea advanced by those who took the floor, with one or two pointed remarks separating the kernel of thought from the husk of verbiage. That done, Voronov would settle his massive, somewhat angular frame in the depths of the armchair, leaving the meeting to proceed, as it were, without him. Listening to the discussion it occurred to Rogov that this small green room was like a ship sailing on a clearly defined course. But what was wrong? Was the ship listing? No, it was just Remennikov flying off the handle. Queer fellow! Couldn't he have calmly stated that he needed another forty hewers to fulfil the quarterly plan and substantiated the claim with facts and figures, instead of getting all wrought up.

The indulgent smile that had dwelt on Rogov's face, vanished. Remennikov was not simply being queer! Only a short while ago he had bragged over the telephone that he had a reserve of a score or so miners engaged in auxiliary work. Why all this belligerence now?

Slightly raising a bushy eyebrow, Voronov turned his eyes to the chief of the trust's planning department.

“What do you say?”

The chief cleared his throat, thought for a moment, and said that of the latest contingent of new workers only

twenty would be sent to No. 10, the remaining two hundred being earmarked for distribution in roughly the same proportions among the other pits, with the exception of Kapitalnaya, which was due to get sixty-five.

At first Rogov thought he had not heard aright, but the engineer from the trust repeated:

"So far we are giving sixty-five to Kapitalnaya."

Noticing that Rogov had started impatiently, Voronov bent forward slightly in his chair and nodded to him.

"Yes?"

Bondarchuk next to him made no movement: he sat as before, fingers interlaced on his knee, head slightly bent to one side.

"I don't quite understand. . ." Rogov spread his hands. "Why all this bounty for Kapitalnaya?"

The chief of the planning department shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't understand either. You're not refusing, are you?"

"It's not I who am refusing your bounty," Rogov interrupted him. "It's a state enterprise, a whole collective of workers!"

"Make yourself clearer, please!" Voronov put in.

Rogov went on with deliberation.

"Kapitalnaya does not need any additional workers now."

"What about later on?"

"Later on there will be even less need. Superfluous people are only a ballast retarding the growth of productivity and wages."

"Wait a minute!" said Cherkashin, the chief engineer of the trust and its acting manager. "Wait a minute, Rogov! I didn't think you were one of those who go in

for sweeping gestures. For a month and a half you have been telling us you have to go full steam ahead! Well here's your chance! Besides, you've got to get housing construction under way by spring."

Rogov's cheeks flushed

"Kapitalnaya does not need any more workers now!" he almost shouted when Cherkashin finished. "I won't take them!"

Bondarchuk nodded: "Easy there!"

"I won't take them," Rogov repeated in a more level tone. "Surely the trust knows that we have released nearly a hundred workers by fully mechanizing our timber stores and cutting over-expanded staffs in the auxiliary departments. And there are more reserves to be tapped. Radical mechanization of underground work will give us still more."

"Hm . ." Voronov's keen eyes slowly surveyed the assembly. "Hm. . ."

Remennikov sat with downcast eyes. Rogov was still standing. Cherkashin was pondering the matter. When he spoke it was in a tone of finality.

"You'll have to take the workers."

Rogov shook his head.

"You shall! We at the trust are in a better position to see what the pits need."

"I'm afraid you don't see very much then . ." Rogov looked around the now silent gathering.

Cherkashin gestured indignantly. Voronov, however, coughed softly and as if unaware of the mounting passions, tapped with his pencil against the desk blotter for silence, and summed up.

"The discussion has been exceedingly interesting . . . questions of cardinal importance have been touched upon

I would ask you, comrades, to think over Rogov's stand. I shall not make any decision as yet, but tomorrow . . . tomorrow morning . . . I expect you, Cherkashin, to come here with a plan for the utilization of personnel. Very interesting indeed!"

As he closed the meeting, Voronov was looking at Rogov with a kindly smile.

Rogov was not at all surprised when Cherkashin phoned him the next day and said with a touch of sarcasm:

"The trust has complied with your wishes, Comrade Rogov. You will not get any new workers. You'll have to manage with what you have."

CHAPTER XXIV

Semyon Starodubtsev took Rogov's new appointment calmly, as something he had foreseen, if not predicted. Once he remarked to Rogov with a confidential wink:

"Our graduating class was a lucky one, wasn't it?"

On the whole, however, the transport chief's manner was irreproachable. He did not flatter his old school chum, was studiously businesslike in conversation and created a general impression of efficiency. Nevertheless, underground transport continued to function worse than any other department in the mine. Latterly Rogov himself had gone into all transport affairs. Semyon showed no surprise at this; he seemed indeed to welcome the fact. Together they inspected the track, rolling stock, electric locomotives and the locomotive sheds. Anticipating Rogov's criticism, Starodubtsev frequently reprimanded his subordinates in the pit manager's presence.

"You can see for yourself, Pavel, what these people are like," he would complain, shrugging his narrow shoulders. "A lot of nitwits. You can spend a whole day hammering something into their heads and they'll go on doing it their own way."

One of the "nitwits"—a tall young man with a long face and knitted brows—slowly stroked the side of his electric locomotive as he listened to the transport chief's tirade. The locomotive had stopped at a siding for some unknown reason.

"What're you stroking it for?" Starodubtsev said, taking a step toward him. "Think it's a pony, or what?"

"What do you want me to do, beat it?" the driver retorted. "It's somebody else needs a beating."

"None of your lip, young man!" Starodubtsev flared back. "Why don't you do something instead of just standing there? Go and call the breakdown car over at once!"

The young man drew himself up.

"Don't shout at me!" he said in a clear, ringing voice, looking at Rogov as he spoke. "I'm not to blame. I warned the mechanic, but he wouldn't listen. 'Take her out and don't waste time talking!' he said." The driver took a quick breath and slapping the side of the locomotive continued through stiff lips. "She's been run ragged, five months without an overhauling. That's what makes me so sore, see?"

Rogov ran across the same driver several times after that. He took an interest in the young man's work and asked others about him.

"Anatoli Kostylev?" transport workers would reply. "First-rate driver. He can drive anything on wheels."

In response to Rogov's summons, Kostylev came to the office. He was punctual to the minute. A well-set-up

young man, clean-shaven and dressed in a well-tailored it, immaculate shirt and neat tie, he was the personification of neatness and order. His mere presence seemed to impart a new order and meaning to everything around him.

"I've been driving an electric locomotive for three years now," he said briefly. "As for that talk with the transport chief, you needn't attach any importance to it, Pavel Gordeyevich—I was a bit excited at the time."

Rogov asked him what he thought of the transport department, how he liked his work, and the people he worked with. Rogov found himself listening to him with pleasure. This young man had a good head on his shoulders.

Kostylev gave a detailed account of what he believed to be the reasons for the poor work of the transport people.

"In the first place the track maintenance crews are short of men, they try to get the current repair work done by volunteers; secondly, the small trams ought to have been replaced long ago by heavy duty cars, or at least the ones in use should be fitted with higher sides; thirdly, and this is the main thing, the electric locomotives are badly in need of general overhauling. They say there aren't any spare motors to replace them. That's all bosh. There are twelve of them working on the line every day and you really don't need more than eight. That is, if the dispatchers show a little initiative and the loading is organized properly."

"All that is very important," Rogov said. "Take charge of transport, Kostylev. Starodubtsev will turn over the job to you tomorrow. Do you think you can cope with it?"

"Yes, Pavel Gordeyevich, I know I can," Kostylev did not seem in the least surprised. His eyes were grave and

calm. "We have one hundred and twenty Komsomol members. Show them what's wanted, give them the proper training, and..."

"I suppose you study yourself?"

"Of course," the young man appeared surprised at being asked such a question. "Only a correspondence course, though."

"It will be hard for you," Rogov said, "but under no circumstance must you give up your studies. For if you do, you'll soon find that the mine has moved ahead of you. So keep on studying. I'll send for you tomorrow and we'll continue our talk."

The time had now come for a talk with Starodubtsev. He breezed in, smiling.

"I've got some news for you!" he said, looking mysterious. "Oh, I know you're too busy pushing the mining industry ahead to bother with anything else, but I have a great piece of news, Pavel. Klava has presented me with another daughter. Our third."

Rogov congratulated him, trying to hide his embarrassment, but Starodubtsev was blissfully unaware of it.

"Yes," he went on, "the family's growing. I must work harder now and make a pile of money. By the way, I wanted to ask you if you couldn't let me have an advance on my wages. Got to throw a party next week. You must come. You're the godfather, after all."

Rogov got up.

"Now, I won't take any refusal," Senyon bubbled. "It was Klava's idea, and you have to humour these women. What's more, you're quite a personage in the mine these days. Everybody is wondering when you're going to get married yourself and who the lucky girl will be."

Rogov laughed shortly.

"That's all nonsense, of course," Starodubtsev hastened to add. "But you wanted to see me? Anything urgent?"

"Quite," Rogov said. "But I won't keep you long."

"Anything gone wrong? The kiddies've kept me busy since morning. . . ."

"Nothing wrong, but nothing very right either," Rogov replied. "That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. You know, Semyon Konstantinovich, orders are not being carried out and the overhauling of equipment has not been organized . . ."

"Is that what all the fuss is about?" Starodubtsev looked hurt. "We could have settled it tomorrow just as well."

"No, we couldn't!" Rogov's fists clenched. "It's got to be done today, not tomorrow! Don't you realize that transport is the bottleneck now? We'll be committing a crime if we slow down output."

A sickly grimace twisted Starodubtsev's face and he raised his hands.

"Really, Pavel, what's the point of all this 'crime and punishment' stuff? You can't expect everything to go smoothly. That's life. . . ."

"No! It's not the life either I or the men will accept!"

"Nonsense!"

Rogov, taken aback, looked with amazement into the small, colourless eyes of his former schoolmate.

"What has happened to you?" he asked. "How could you have forgotten all we were taught?"

Starodubtsev again raised a hand

"I remember all of it practically word for word, even the lectures of Docent Vanchugov, the dullest of them all. . . ."

"Perhaps you do. But that's not what I mean. You have forgotten what the Party taught us!"

"Careful, Pavel, the Party's got nothing to do with this."

"All right," Rogov agreed. "I'll be careful. Perhaps you are tired? Maybe you'll take a rest for a while? We can send you to a health resort, and afterwards. . ."

"Taking me off the job?" Semyon asked in a whisper, and a convulsive shudder ran through his whole body. The blood drained from his face and small beads of sweat appeared on his pinched nose. "Taking me off? Have you forgotten how we shared the same pair of trousers at school, how we used to divide our black bread ration? And now you're taking me off just when things are particularly, impossibly hard for me?"

"Yes, I am taking you off, Semyon!" Rogov pressed down with his palm on the freshly-typed transfer order. "I can't have you holding up the work. Tomorrow you will turn things over to Kostylev."

He watched Starodubtsev button his leather coat with stiff fingers, pull his fur hat down over his protruding ears, walk down the narrow strip of carpet, his elbows pressed tight against his sides, and, with a quick glance back over his shoulder, seize the door handle.

At home Rogov found a surprise awaiting him. He had hardly had time to take off his overcoat when old Voshchin came in, greeted him rather coldly and asked:

"Where is your . . . er . . . relative, or whatever you call him?"

"Danilov?" Rogov saw nothing amiss yet. "I couldn't say, Afanasi Petrovich. I only see him about once a week myself. He's a restless lad, that relative of mine. Sit down, Afanasi Petrovich."

Voshchin curtly refused the invitation. He was sorry trouble Rogov, he said, but he had come to complain about Danilov.

Rogov, completely bewildered, waited for him to continue. Clearing his throat nervously, the old man launched into his complaint.

He had a niece, he said. Her name was Tonya Lipilina. She was a war invalid, and seriously ill. At times her eyes got so bad she was nearly blind. Now it appeared that this Danilov had met her at the front and, as young men will, had fallen in love with her. There was nothing wrong in that, quite the reverse, in fact.

"It's natural enough," the old man said and his straw-coloured eyebrows twitched. "But at the front the girl was strong and healthy. Now she is an invalid. She may not have much longer to live and she has to be kept quiet. But this Danilov refuses to listen to reason. Tonya's mother has tried talking to him, but he won't listen."

Pavel Gordeyevich must talk to his relative and try to bring him to his senses.

Left alone, Rogov slapped himself violently on the forehead. How could he have been so blind? So that was why Stepan had been so absent-minded lately, that explained the weary look in the lad's eyes.

Only yesterday when he had come home late Rogov had teased him in what he now saw had been very poor taste:

"Having a good time?" he had greeted the lad. "You're wonderful. I thought you'd be far too exhausted after the shift for anything but sleep. It isn't Olenka Pozdnyakova who's tickled your fancy, is it?"

And Stepan had managed a wan smile.

"No, not Olenka, Pavel Gordeyevich. I went to see someone..." Then he added quickly, "I think I'll move in with the Cherepanov crew."

"Nonsense," Rogov protested. "This place will be a morgue without you. You mustn't go, I shan't allow it."

"Pavel Gordeyevich..." Danilov paused, then indicating Valya's picture with his eyes, "she'll be coming some time, won't she?"

"Valya?" a faint shadow flitted over Rogov's face. "That's a long story, Stepan..."

There was something about his voice, the look in his eyes and the deliberate way in which he picked up the portrait and put it down again, that gave Danilov a glimpse of another side of his comrade's life. The discovery gave new meaning to their friendship, even if at the moment Rogov did not know why Stepan suddenly lapsed into silence and regarded him with a look of such tender solicitude.

The next minute they were discussing mine affairs.

And again Rogov was not conscious of any deliberate desire to avoid thinking of Valya, for his thoughts of her were always inextricably bound up with what he was doing.

This was his own private heartache, something that had become part of him. But here beside him this young friend of his had been in trouble and he had been unaware of it.

Tonya Lipilina? Rogov remembered her. Remembered her as a fine strong girl of peerless courage. How could he have been ignorant of the fact that this radiant young life was flickering out nearby?

He phoned down to the mine and, without bothering to change his clothes, waited for the car. Outside it was

pitch dark, and large flakes of snow slid noiselessly over the windowpanes. He was weary and the hour was late, but he decided to go and find Tonya Lipilina at once. After he had seen her and spoken with her he would be able to thrash the whole matter out with Voshchin and Danilov.

... Tonya half rose to meet him, her hands outstretched.

"Pavel Gordeyevich! How nice of you to remember me!"

Her face was alight with happiness and her frail little body was held rigid as if she was about to spring up.

Rogov felt a lump rise in his throat. Groping awkwardly for words, he sat down beside her.

"How could I forget you, Tonya? I didn't know you were here... Forgive me."

"Of course I forgive you!" she laughed and quickly relaxed.

She told him about herself, her hopes and plans.

"Poor Stepan, how hard it must be for him!" she said. "He's clever and strong, but he isn't used to this kind of work. He never complains, but I can see how it is. Please, Pavel Gordeyevich, do keep an eye on him. He's too proud ever to ask for help. Then she added impulsively: "If only I weren't tied to this bed of mine, I would take such good care of him!"

CHAPTER XXV

They tumbled down the steep chute, one after another, into the drift and made their way to the exit.

"Coming to the hostel today, Stepan Georgievich?" Cherepanov asked as they were changing in the washroom.

"Sure," Danilov promised. "But I have to go and see someone first."

Mitenka winked secretly at the crew leader. Their new comrade had been doing a lot of visiting lately. Who could it be?

Danilov was even less talkative than usual. He was afraid to betray, by the slightest sign, his utter weariness. His knees shook, his arms seemed weighted with lead, his palms were swollen, and when he washed off the dirt, red blisters appeared. He was deeply ashamed of those hands and tried his best to hide them from the other lads. But it was useless. Not a single blister escaped their notice. Cherepanov, seeing how Danilov winced as he picked up the soap, shook his head. Sibirtsev sighed. Mitenka too showed his sympathy as best he could.

"It's nothing. You're just not used to it," he remarked with a supreme lack of tact that earned him a dark scowl from Cherepanov.

Danilov envied his comrades with all his heart as he saw how quickly new strength and vigour returned to them after their exhausting labours. Sayenog was already whistling a tune, Mitenka proposed going to the movies, while Sibirtsev good-naturedly cursed some accountant who had forgotten to credit him with the full amount due him under the progressive rate scale.

"The way that Sasha Chernov boasts!" Sanka Lukin shouted, hopping under the shower. "'She's a queen,' he says. He means that Olenka of his. Her hair is like the raven's wing, he says, and her eyes are like stars. He mentioned a couple of other points but I can't remember them now."

They had worked all together that shift on a new seam. For Danilov the last two or three hours had been sheer

torture. He and Sibirtsev had been putting in new timbering in the lower crosscut. Several times during the shift Cherepanov had called Sibirtsev over and cautioned him in a fierce whisper, his hot breath fanning the other's face:

"I'm warning you again: go easy on Stepan Georgievich! Haven't you any sense?"

"I've got sense all right," Sibirtsev sheepishly excused himself, "but you see what he's like: he grabs the work out of your hand, and if you say anything he just looks at you. What can I do about it?"

Had Danilov been aware of this conversation there would have been trouble. But he had neither the time nor the energy for anything but his work. In the moments when he paused to catch his breath he would watch the easy, effortless movements of his mate and think bitterly: "Didn't I dig trenches for four years, didn't I march sixty kilometres at a stretch with full kit and go straight into battle? Then why should this mine work come so hard?" He couldn't understand it and it worried him.

He could not fail to notice how the crew were endeavouring, as tactfully as they could, to help him shoulder the heavy burden of unaccustomed work. But while this had gladdened and encouraged him at first, he now had difficulty in concealing his irritation. Why should he be weaker than, say, Mitenka? The way that lad would pick up a heavy log, measure it with a glance, whistling under his breath, and in one or two blows have it shaped into a prop as straight as a candle, was a pleasure to see. Why couldn't he, Danilov, do the same?

.. On the way from the washroom they met Rogov. In the light from the window, his prominent cheekbones stood out and his eyes danced. Spreading out his arms

as if he would embrace them all, he inquired anxiously:

"Well, friends, how's the seam?"

"Made a big dent in it today!" boomed Lukin in a deep bass.

"Good! That's another 50 metres stripped, and before you know it we'll have another hundred cleared. There'll be plenty of elbow room soon." He turned to Danilov.

"Well, Sergeant, haven't *you* anything to report?"

Danilov's smile was grim in spite of himself.

"I'd better keep quiet or I might have to take the defensive, Comrade Captain...."

Rogov looked concerned. "The defensive? When the big push is on? Well, we'll take that up later. And now off with you all to the canteen!"

The entire staff of the canteen waited on the crew, including the chef himself, who moved with astonishing speed in spite of his girth. He embarrassed the boys at the start by assuring them that he had a special treat for them and mentioned some French name they had never heard of but which sounded highly promising.

"That's the stuff!" said Sanka Lukin. "Let's have it!"

The middle-aged cook concentrated her attention on Mitenka who was the smallest and most boyish-looking of the lot. She brought him a mug of steaming coffee and sat down beside him with her cheek resting in her palm.

"Go on, Duckie, eat. You're still growing. "

"That's right, Mitenka," the crew leader put in, "maybe you'll grow smarter too while you're at it."

Mitenka blushed and went on eating, looking askance at the elderly cook who kept sighing audibly.

But Danilov could hardly hold his spoon and he had to force himself to eat. And when at last he reached home,

he dropped exhausted on the bed. For a long time he tossed about trying in vain to rest his aching arms. He almost dreaded the prospect of having to go to work the next day and the day after, to dig and hew and shovel coal, to hammer in props and drill holes in the face. And for the first time he felt a twinge of something like envy of experienced miners, and their labour seemed to him nothing short of heroism. Would he ever be like them, he wondered anxiously. And although he made up his mind there and then that he would be a miner whatever happened, he was not comforted. Nor could he fall asleep. When the setting sun looked in at his window he rose and wincing from the pain in his arms, dressed.

Of course, he must go at once to Tonya. How could he think of resting if he didn't? A curious uneasiness came over him and made him hurry. He almost ran all the way to her house. As he reached the familiar little side street someone called him from a vegetable patch:

"Young man! I want to talk to you."

It was Tonya's mother, Maria Tikhonovna. She came over slowly and resting her weathered hands on the wattle fence she surveyed Danilov. She wore the same shabby kerchief low over her forehead.

Danilov hurried forward to meet her.

"Maria Tikhonovna! How is Tonya? I couldn't come yesterday. . . You see, my work. . ."

"Let my little daughter be," the woman interrupted him. Her face softened for an instant, but froze again at once. And her voice sounded harsh as with lowered eyelids she added: "Tonya is not for you. . . ." She took her hands off the fence, adjusted her kerchief and repeated in a flat voice: "Tonya is not for you. . . ." She turned and with bent head walked slowly toward the house.

Clinging to the fence Danilov stared after her with eyes in which the light had suddenly died. A paled twilight hovered over the earth and little spirals of grey smoke rose up from the chimneys. The twilight thickened and still Danilov stood staring at the house. The green-tinted light had long since appeared in Tonya's windows in their carved fretwork frames. He closed his eyes for a moment and pictured the room where she was lying, every detail of her surroundings. How familiar it had all become! Yes, he had been coming here every evening in these few brief weeks. He would sit for hours with her until Tonya, her eyelids heavy with sleep, would say: "Good-night, Stepan. I shall see you in my dreams."

And her dark lashes would quiver a little, like bird's wings after flight, and then come to rest against the pure white of her cheeks. Sometimes he would rise and leave at once, but more often he would stay by her bedside listening to her breathing and to Maria Tikhonovna's soft footfall behind the partition. At times he had felt a dull resentment against Tonya's mother for her obvious distrust of him, for her repeated attempts to thrust herself between him and Tonya.

There were days when Tonya felt quite well and when the pain in her eyes did not bother her. And then she would get out of bed and together they would go outside, her hot little hand resting on his arm. Once she expressed a desire to climb the little hill near the house. "I want to be nearer the sun," she said. He had taken her hand and they had walked slowly down the street. Stepan saw nothing but her shining eyes and the look of tense expectancy on her face. His heart had thumped wildly, and he had not noticed how some miners passing by had

stepped aside respectfully to let them pass, nor had he heard the remark one of them made:

"That's true love for you!"

But Tonya had heard and all that day she had been pensive.

They sat on the knoll for a long time. A host of silvery cobwebs of intricate design floated in the crystal air overhead. At their feet, basking in the midday sun and the fresh breeze from the mountain valleys, sprawled the little town, its mine tipples thrusting up toward the blue sky.

Danilov read the newspaper to her and then fell to talking about Rogov's troubles at work. Presently he turned to her. "Happy?"

"Yes, Stepan," she replied. "Only I'd like to be with you always in everything." She paused and added with a searching glance at him. "And you?"

"Me?" Danilov was surprised. "How can you ask? I'm in sound health, and you here beside me."

"But are you really happy?"

"Tonya!"

"Well, are you?"

He paused for a moment, and returning her steady, insistent gaze, he said.

"I am only half happy. . . . It is good to have you here with me, but I can't be quite happy to see you like this."

Tonya shook her head.

"No, Stepan," she said. "There is no such thing as half-happiness."

"Tonya. . . ."

"No!" her voice broke, and she seemed to go limp. Then timidly she murmured: "Forgive me, Stepan, I won't talk about it any more . . ."

An hour later she was in bed again, the stinging pain in her eyes having driven out all other thoughts. Danilov sat with her until late. As he was leaving the house Maria Tikhonovna stopped him and for the first time she spoke to him in a way that both hurt and surprised him.

Did he not realize that his frequent visits might be harmful for the girl's health. The doctors had ordered complete rest. Could he not see that his presence disturbed, excited her, filled her head with all sorts of notions. Why did he do it? Did he want to ruin her health completely? She, Tonya's mother, would stop at nothing to protect her child.

"Don't trample on other folks' sorrow!" she cried.

For a moment Danilov had stood bowed under the weight of this unexpected calamity, and when the silence became unbearable, he asked in a whisper, trying not to betray the turmoil within him.

"But...but how can I go on living.. without Tonya?"

Maria Tikhonovna was evidently about to retort: "That is no concern of ours!" but the words stuck in her throat at the sight of the unutterable misery that stared at her from Danilov's eyes.

He came again the next day and continued to come every day after that as if that talk with the mother had not taken place. Tonya's condition varied, on some days she seemed better, on other days, worse. The doctors came and went. There were two of them, a short, sharp-faced woman doctor named Antonina Sergeyevna, and a surgeon, Tkachenko. Danilov noticed that Antonina Sergeyevna's small and by no means beautiful hands had a remarkably soothing effect on Tonya. Tkachenko, the

surgeon, was noisy and talkative, and he took an interest not only in his patient's condition but in everything and everyone about her.

The two doctors did not get along with one another. This was not immediately apparent, but one had only to listen to what each said and observe their individual approach to the patient's illness to see that these two people differed not only in character but in their understanding of the problems that faced them.

Antonina Sergeyevna moved about noiselessly as if floating in the air. Whenever Danilov came she would fix him with her stern, unblinking gaze and order him to keep as quiet as possible.

"Hush! Don't make such a noise with those great big boots of yours!"

"The main thing for you, my dear," she was constantly assuring Tonya, "is complete rest and quiet. It is extremely important for your condition to be able to shut yourself off from all worldly affairs."

Danilov acquired a reverential awe for Antonina Sergeyevna and in her presence he walked about on tiptoe, coughed into his hand and even managed to control his breathing.

On one of his visits he found Tkachenko at Tonya's bedside. The surgeon was a man of quick, impulsive gestures, he neither coughed into his hand nor called for silence. His face lit up when Danilov introduced himself and he proceeded forthwith to subject the young man to a regular cross-examination.

"Ah, a sniper too? And what was your score, may I ask?" On learning that Danilov had picked off three hundred and nine Hitlerites, he grew quite excited: "And every one of them outright?"

"Most of them," the sniper replied.

"Most of them, you say?" he marvelled. "Now what do you think of that!" He turned to glance at Tonya, but she lay with her face half-turned to the wall.

On the way home, Danilov cautiously inquired:

"How is she coming along, doctor?"

"Tell me, young man, what interest do you have in this girl?"

Stepan looked into the doctor's eyes which were grave at this moment. "I love her, doctor," he said. "She means more to me than life itself!"

"Splendid!" the doctor almost shouted, and his hands clenched themselves into fists. "Splendid!" he repeated. "But you must love her openly, so that all the world should know, not stealthily, on the quiet. You're a soldier, after all, a miner, and you have a young, ardent heart. You are the one who can bring her back to life. It is you she needs more than anything else. Damn it," he went on after a pause, "I can't forgive myself for having come on the scene too late to prevent that Antonina Sergeyevna from smothering the child in her perpetual whispers and hushed silence. And the mother has taken her cue from her, she's ready to protect her daughter from the sun itself. Preposterous!"

On parting he appealed to the young man once again.

"Stepan Danilov, you can do more in this case than a dozen professors. You hear? You came to Tonya from the big world, from a life and a people the whole world envies. You must pull her back into that life, breathe strength into that frail little body of hers! Don't lose heart, you can do it. You've got the gift."

"Oh, I've got enough of that sort of gift for a whole

battalion!" Danilov laughed. And from that time he threw himself heart and soul into the task of "pulling" Tonya back to life.

In the meantime work in the pit grew harder from day to day. Danilov often wondered bitterly when he would grow accustomed to this work, when instead of that excruciating ache in his arms and his whole body he would experience nothing more than a pleasant weariness coupled with a sense of satisfaction.

"How is the work, Stepan?" Tonya would ask him. "Are you getting used to it?"

"Oh yes," he would hasten to assure her. "Of course I am."

"And do the others praise you? I had such a funny dream the other night, Stepan. I dreamed that the division commander praised you in front of all the men for being a famous miner. And I thought to myself: 'But he isn't a miner, he's a sniper!'"

"As for praise . . . well, I'm afraid there isn't so much of that . . ." Danilov confessed. "But I can't go on working the way I'm doing now. I simply can't. After all, the crew is named after me! And if you only knew what a wonderful crew it is, what splendid lads! We had a meeting yesterday. They elected the presiding committee—Stakhanovite-so-and-so, Stakhanovite. . . . And then, Hero of the Soviet Union Danilov. Not *Stakhanovite* Danilov, you see. And I'd rather hear that than anything else. I've got to make good! Then as I sat there on the platform I was thinking that very soon Tonya will be coming with me to meetings like this and hearing them say nice things about me."

Tonya's cheeks grew pink and she sighed.

"It's so good to be among your own people, Stepan,"

she said slowly. "You do believe I will be with you and with all the others soon, don't you?"

He did believe it. Yet the mother's bitter words still rang in his ears: "Leave my daughter alone. . . . Don't trample on other folks' sorrow!"

Stepan Danilov trample on anyone's sorrow! Ah, mother, mother, how could you have said such a thing. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

Danilov waited up for Rogov for a while and then went to bed, only to find that he could not sleep. He got up—for the second time since his shift—brewed a pot of tea, and laid the table for supper. But by the time all was ready he had lost his appetite. He stood at the window staring through the snowy pane. What was Tonya doing, he wondered. Ah, Tonya, your soldier is in trouble!

Through the sliding screen of snowflakes he caught the faint flicker of light from the colliery. The colliery. . . . Danilov turned sharply, and throwing on his overcoat, hurried outside.

The colliery! For the first time in all these weeks he was going there for help, for advice. How would it treat him now? Would it be as stern and exacting as in hours of labour?

Passing by the office he noticed a light in the Party organizer's window and decided to drop in. A heart-to-heart talk with Bondarchuk was what he wanted.

Bondarchuk was alone. He raised his head with its high forehead from the book he was reading and greeted Danilov with a tired smile.

"I'm trying to read but my thoughts are in the mine," he said. "Sit down, Stepan."

Danilov took off his coat and sat down. "Excuse me for bothering you, Victor Petrovich," he said. "I thought I'd come and see you. There's something on my mind. . . . I wanted to talk to you about it. . . ." He paused for a few minutes, then asked suddenly: "What is happiness, Victor Petrovich? What do you think?"

"Happiness?" Bondarchuk echoed. He laid the ruler between the pages of his book, closed it, rose and walked around the desk, watching his angular shadow on the wall. "That's a difficult question, Stepan. Suppose you think it over and find the answer yourself?"

"I am thinking, I never stop thinking about it."

"And searching for it too?"

Stepan shook his head.

"I'm not searching for happiness, I want to understand it."

"Hm. . . . There's happiness and happiness, you know."

"Yes, but I want the real thing."

Bondarchuk's eyes narrowed.

"But you're holding happiness in your two hands. Can't you feel it?"

"I can." Stepan leaned his chest against the edge of the desk. "But it's so hard to know exactly, Victor Petrovich. Sometimes you don't even recognize it when you have it in your grasp."

"Yes, it's hard. . . . You're right about that. True happiness is hard to attain. But sometimes it is even harder to know the full meaning of happiness. In my opinion happiness is being at one with the people, fighting for the people. . . . Happiness is being able to see the glorious future through the everyday life of the present, to be able to carry that future in your heart, to feel it throbbing in your veins. Do you see that, Stepan? We marched to the

west, and nearly every one of us felt as he marched that every kilometre he advanced meant that much territory behind him where people were free again to love, to bear children, to plant grain—and, what is most important, to live like human beings. That's it! To live! And now? Now we are still soldiers in thought and feeling."

"Yes, I'm a soldier," Stepan caught up. "But I can't help feeling that I'm missing the main thing in life. What good am I in the pit? The way I look at it, a man ought to be working where he's most needed. And I . . . look!" With an abrupt gesture he thrust his hands out in front of him, exposing the crimson calluses on the palms

Bondarchuk smiled gently.

"So you don't take to the pit?"

"My hands don't seem to take to it. You say: I'm holding my happiness in my hands, but I've got to hold on to it with my teeth. These hands wouldn't hold anything!"

Without removing his searching gaze from the young man's face Bondarchuk went on in a casual tone. "I happened to be talking about you just today. . . . I see it's hard for you. But what do you think yourself, does the Cherepanov crew need you? Are you indispensable there?"

"Indispensable?"

"Yes, you said yourself: 'a man ought to be working where he's most needed.'"

"I see," Stepan said, rising quickly to his feet. "No, I shan't quit, I've got to stick it out even if it kills me! But I didn't come here to talk about myself."

He drew his chair up closer and launched into an agitated account of Tonya's plight. He told the Party organizer how the girl's mother had thrust herself between them and how dangerous it was for Tonya to be cut

off like that from life. But how was that to be avoided without causing anyone unnecessary pain?

Bondarchuk listened to Stepan's excited, disjointed outpouring without a word. His face was calm except for the eyes which now widened with surprise, now lit up with eager interest.

"Go on. Go on. I'm listening."

"We must do something, we must! But how can anything be done without hurting anyone?" Stepan repeated urgently.

Bondarchuk was silent for a while. Then he sat up abruptly as if an idea had occurred to him, and regarded Danilov with a twinkle in his eye.

"You've been having a pretty hard time of it in the pit, haven't you, Stepan?" he asked.

"That I have."

"But you are overcoming the difficulties?"

"Yes, the worst is over now."

"Suppose you were all alone there in the pit with nobody around you, would you have been able to stick it out in spite of everything?"

"What for? A few extra blisters?"

"That's just it! It was because of the others that you hacked away until your hands bled. But Tonya is all alone, she has to fight her battle by herself. And that is why she is making such feeble progress, Stepan. Tonya must be brought back into this big life of ours! Don't beat about the bush any more, Stepan. Marry her!"

"Marry her?"

Stepan stared in surprise at the Party organizer, breathing rapidly. Then bid him a hasty farewell and went out. Some twenty minutes later he was at Tonya's house. He hardly knew how he had got there. He stood

for a while outside the door and glanced over his shoulder as if he had heard Bondarchuk's voice urging him again. "Marry her!"

It was night. The snow was coming down in large flakes. A greenish light shone from the windows of the familiar little house. Suddenly the figure of Grigori Voshchin emerged noiselessly from the darkness. Stepan stepped back in an effort to efface himself, but Voshchin paused and proffering him a packet of cigarettes in the dark, he inquired casually:

"Taking the air? Have a smoke, Stepan."

Danilov reached for a cigarette murmuring something about the weather.

"Aunt Maria complained to Dad again today," Grigori interrupted him. "The old man got angry and rushed off to Rogov. He says folks are beginning to talk."

Danilov drew himself up sharply. He felt strong and independent again. Glancing at the windows of the house, he said in a low voice: "If Tonya needs me . . . I'm right here. . . ."

Grigori said nothing. Then he sighed briefly and seizing Stepan's hand pressed it warmly.

"I know how you feel, man. . . . Remember in the train? I knew even then, but I was afraid to tell you the truth. And now my heart aches for the two of you. But you are both strong. You'll be all right. And if you ever need my help just let me know."

It was going on for ten o'clock and the end of the meeting was not yet in sight. Twelve speakers had already taken the floor, or rather twelve speeches had been made, because there were only six persons present, including

Rogov, who had spoken once, and Mitenka, who, using his prerogative as chairman, had spoken three times. The chairman was worn out, he looked quite dazed. No one bothered any more about the original time limits, or even the additional ones, set for the speakers, and there was nothing he could do but eye his watch as the speeches went on and on.

The first item on the agenda had been quickly disposed of. There had been no two opinions about it--the crew would have to be included in the letter to Stalin, no one could deny that all of its members had every right to sign the message. Cherepanov, consulting his notebook, gave a detailed account of the showing made by each member of the brigade in the past three months; Sibirtsev, Lukin and Aleshkov, 210 per cent, Cherepanov, 280 per cent, Goldobin (that was Mitenka) a bit less, only 170 per cent, but then you had to make allowances for his temperament. And next comes . . .

But at this point the crew leader paused, and somehow everyone at once guessed the reason.

"Go on," Rogov urged him on. "Go on. Next comes Stepan Danilov."

"Yes, Stepan Georgievich," Cherepanov passed a hand through his dark hair.

"Well, and how much did he make?" Rogov demanded, although he knew very well exactly how much Danilov had turned out each shift.

"He's nearly up to 120 already."

"Is that all?" A barely perceptible smile crossed the mine chief's face. "And why 'already' if he has the lowest output in the crew?"

"I like that!" Mitenka exclaimed indignantly. "The lowest output!"

Everyone began talking at once and gesticulating wildly. Couldn't Pavel Gordeyevich understand that Danilov had only been on the job little more than a month. How could you expect him to measure up to Cherepanov who had been at it for a whole year? What's more, anyone could see that Stepan Georgievich was doing his level best, wasn't letting up for a minute and that made it all the harder for him.

Cherepanov told about an incident that had occurred in the pit office.

"The checkweighman had looked at the output figures and then at Stepan Georgievich and said: 'What do you want to be wearing yourself out for working at the face, Comrade Hero? You've done your bit for the country.' Stepan Georgievich gave him a look, turned round and walked out. I wanted to take that donkey and throw him out of the window, but no self-respecting miner would bother with a fellow like that."

Sibirtsev cleared his throat noisily—a sign that he was greatly moved.

"You leave Danilov alone I'm teaching him and I know all about it You leave him to me!"

It was no easy task Sibirtsev had undertaken when he volunteered to teach a novice like Stepan Danilov. The two young men were an arresting pair. Beside the short, wiry soldier with the unruly lock of fair hair now frequently smudged with coal, Sibirtsev looked bigger, heavier and clumsier than he really was. Yet he had been somewhat in awe of the soldier from the very first and instead of telling him what to do or briefly explaining how to do it, he would beat about the bush.

“Stepan Georgievich . . . suppose we do this now?”

Danilov couldn't understand it at first and when he finally caught on, he lost his temper and gave his mate a piece of his mind.

“Listen here!” he said. “Stop acting as if I were a young lady just out of finishing school. Get me?”

Gradually Sibirtsev grew accustomed to his new role and began to behave naturally. True, now and again he would tremble inwardly when Danilov shouted at him suddenly: “Look here, chief, what's the point of hogging all the work?”

At the same time Sibirtsev looked down a little on the other members of the crew. After all, he was the only miner in the pit who had a Hero for his helper. He began to feel so superior that one day he flatly refused to attend a Komsomol meeting of the crew on the grounds that he and Stepan Georgievich had some urgent business to attend to.

Cherepanov was furious. “Urgent business, eh? All right . . . we'll see about that.”

The next day he called Danilov aside and told him briefly what had happened.

“Urgent business?” Stepan looked surprised, then remembering that as usual he had spent the evening in question with Tonya, he frowned and said: “Don't worry, I'll handle this!”

Later, as he and Sibirtsev were working at the face, he said casually:

“What's the idea of telling lies?”

“What lies?” Sibirtsev echoed in surprise.

But guessing from his helper's tone that the subject was too delicate to pursue, he shouted:

"Didn't I tell you to put those props up in the lower bench."

Danilov said no more, and spent the rest of the shift timbering. He even whistled a tune under his breath as he noted with satisfaction that he wasn't doing so badly. But in the washroom after work, when he was alone with Sibirtsev, he went straight to the point.

"How about telling lies?"

He talked for a long time, examining the question of lying from the most unexpected angles and waxing so eloquent on the subject that Sibirtsev finally let out a howl that startled the old cleaner who had been dozing on her stool.

"You can't do it, Stepan Georgievich!"

"Can't do what?"

"You can't leave me! I'd never stand the disgrace."

Danilov regarded his mate coldly.

"Well, I'll think about it...."

After that incident the other members of the crew teased Sibirtsev: "Well, Georgi, did you attend to that urgent business of yours?"

The miner would grin sheepishly, but his respect for Danilov was now greater than ever before, and when he said "You leave him to me, I'll take care of him!" he meant it.

"So we're going to ask the miners to permit our whole crew to sign the letter?" Cherepanov asked, glancing at Mitenka out of the corner of his eye

Mitenka, remembering his duties as chairman, rapped the table smartly with his thick joiner's pencil.

"Who's in favour?"

All were in favour.

“No smoking!” Mitenka shouted at Sanka Lukin, who was blowing out smoke into his fist “Well, comrades,” he added, “I’m afraid we’ll have to close the meeting. The reporter on the next question hasn’t turned up.”

The reporter in question was Khmelchenko who had been summoned to the City Committee and had not yet returned. The meeting might indeed have ended there had the crew leader not spoken up at that moment. There was nothing for the chairman to do but give him the floor—after all, you couldn’t very well stop the chief from speaking.

Cherepanov began by going over the last shift on which they had all worked together. He hadn’t liked that shift; there were some important details he objected to. He emphasized the word “details,” and noticing that Aleshkov turned away quickly, he said:

“Don’t you try and get out of it! Look me straight in the eyes as a Komsomol member should and tell me this: What makes you do such rotten timbering? You won’t say? Then I’ll tell you Laziness, that’s what! I don’t understand,” he went on, turning to Rogov, “I don’t understand, Pavel Gordeyevich, how we can let such things pass? We’re always talking and writing in the newspapers about the need for Stakhanovites to pass on their experience. But after all Stakhanovite experience is made up of a heap of small details that don’t hit you in the eye all at once. If you ask me, some of us are beginning to get swell-headed. We think because we’re Stakhanovites we can get away with anything! But that’s all nonsense. Take the way Sayenog was working today, for instance. It’s enough to make a cat laugh! Instead of sending the coal down gradually, he hewed so much he had a regular mountain of it behind him. He could hardly climb out himself, and he sweated a whole hour after that clearing

it away. That's what comes of using more brawn than brains, of not planning ahead, as Pavel Gordeyevich told us last time. If Sayenog had stopped more often to let the coal through he would have had more room to work which means he'd be less tired at the end of the shift.

"And here's something else: the timbermen shout down from the upper level that they've brought the props, and instead of telling them to haul the stuff down at once, friend Mitenka here says: 'All right, leave it there, we'll come and get it when we need it.' And the timber fellows are only too glad to leave it there. 'Nice chaps, those Komsomol members,' they say. 'Don't give us any trouble.' But I noticed that we wasted a good hour bringing down that timber. It's downright irrational, that's what it is!"

Cherepanov glanced questioninglly at Rogov as he used the unaccustomed word.

Rogov hastily lit a cigarette. He was deeply moved by the whole meeting, and particularly by what the crew leader had said. A feeling of elation swept him. Listening to these youngsters gave him a glimpse of thrilling prospects that had seemed far beyond his reach only six months ago. He wanted to say something to these young men, something that would gladden their young hearts. . . . But at that moment Danilov came in. He brushed the snow off his hat in the doorway and removed his coat.

"Take a seat, Stepan Georgievich," Cherepanov greeted him, then added a trifle sternly: "You're a bit late. We're just finishing."

Stepan sat down beside Rogov, glanced at him and at the young miners and felt his heart swell within him. By the expression on the faces of Rogov and Cherepanov, by Sibirtsev's nervous cough, and the merry, knowing

twinkle in Mitenka's eyes he saw that the whole of his simple life with its present trials and tribulations was an open book to these comrades of his. Rogov laid a large hot hand on his knee and said in an undertone:

"You and I must have a talk, Stepan. We'll get together tonight."

Rogov left shortly afterwards—he had business to attend to in the mine. Mitenka quickly got supper ready, a duty he believed to be part of the chairman's functions, and they all sat down to eat.

With young Voshchin's friendly words still in his ears, Danilov scanned the faces of his comrades, these lads who had grown as near to him as his front-line pals had once been, and he felt that they sympathized with him, that they longed to help him but did not know how, and were waiting for him to give them some inkling of what to do.

"Comrades," he said pushing aside his cup. "I want to tell you about something that happened to me once at the front. I want you to tell me what you think about it.

"I wasn't a sniper then, just a scout. . . We had dug in on the left bank of the river and we had orders to hold on to the position at all costs. There had been gardens there before the war, and a village of little white cottages. But now there was nothing. The enemy fire had swept everything clean. But we had dug in so firmly nothing could get us out of there. It was a grim business. . . ."

Stepan smoothed back his hair, eyed the boys absently and compressed his lips for a moment.

"Our regiment stood on a long, steep ridge," he went on after a pause. "Not a tree, nor even a shrub in sight. In front of us was a swamp and beyond that another ridge with a gully cutting across it, the mouth of the gully

facing us. Now and again German tanks or self-propelled guns would collect in that gully and then make a dash into the open, fanning out as they poured out of the mouth of the ravine. They kept harassing us constantly, for there we were within point-blank range. We had to change the locations of a dozen observation posts, but there was no question of pulling back.

"Early one morning after a hectic night, Pavel Gordeyevich, who was the battalion commander, called me over. I was shocked by the look of him—the strain was certainly telling on him. The Pavel Gordeyevich you know is a strong, sturdy man, but those three weeks on the ridge had made his cheeks sink in and his eyes squint as if he was looking at the sun all the time. But outwardly he was calm and his voice was firm. We went down the communication trench together and he plucked a yellow flower growing on the parapet, crushed it between his fingers, smelt its fragrance and sort of smiled. I remember thinking that he must have just got a letter. He used to get one practically every week—I've just found out from whom."

Stepan sighed

"You can't imagine how nice it is to get letters when you're in the front lines. Nobody ever wrote to me. Only once the sergeant-major handed me a tobacco pouch sent as a gift from my home town, and inside there was a note signed 'Olya and Vera' that read something like this: 'Dear Comrade, we are always thinking of you. We wish you good luck and hope the enemy will be defeated soon.' I put that note inside my Komsomol card and carried it around with me.

"To come back to the story, Pavel Gordeyevich led the way right to the forward positions. Then he stopped puffed

at his bag, squinted at the hill held by the fascists and then pointed at the mouth of the gully. 'Know that gap?' he asked me. 'I should say I do,' I answered. 'Just got back from there at dawn.'

"Pavel Gordeyevich nodded. 'Good,' he said. 'We've got orders to seal it up. You'll take a party of sappers down there tonight—only see that it's closed tight.'

"I spent a good four hours lying in an observation slit and surveying the approaches to the gully. I was always rather good at sizing up a situation, and now I knew we were in for a hot time. When supper was passed around I drank my forty-six grams of spirits and ate and promptly fell asleep right there under the roof made of logs. I'd hardly closed my eyes when they woke me up. I must have slept quite a long time though, because it was dark outside. It was very quiet and the sky was clear and starry. I felt a warm wind against my face and there was a whiff of smoke from a fire built under cover so the enemy couldn't spot it. I found my sappers sitting against the earthen wall where the trench connected with the next one and smoking into their sleeves.

" 'Taking it easy?' I said. 'That's right,' they replied. 'Well, make the most of it while you can,' I said, 'because we're moving soon. How many of you are there?' 'A dozen,' someone piped up. 'What about the medical orderly?' said another. 'Oh, yes, that makes thirteen.'

"At first it was too dark to see them, but when my eyes got used to the darkness I could tell that they were a sturdy-looking lot, the sort you could count on in a tough spot. I told the sergeant-major in command what the assignment was.

" 'Clear enough, sergeant,' the sergeant-major said, 'let's get going.'

"We crawled out into no-man's-land from one of our outposts, and after skirting our mine field pushed on into the hollow. The going was rather slow, for each sapper had six tank mines to carry, and I didn't hurry them along for August nights were long enough. We were practically at the mouth of the gully when the first parachute flare went up—how I hated the damn things—their light seemed to press against your shoulders and glue you to the ground. You had to know your business to be able to move under illumination like that. On the other hand it gave us a good view of the terrain and helped us to figure out the best way of getting to where we were going. In the meantime the Germans had smelt something and started probing with their machine guns. All around us the bursts were raising spurts of earth. 'Damn them,' muttered the sergeant-major when a fresh burst of machine-gun fire splashed him up with mud, 'just because they're nervous I've got to crawl in the muck.' And that was the only comment anyone made

"I'd been heading for the three German Tiger tanks our gunners had bagged so as to make use of the bit of shelter they offered. When we reached them the sappers halted for a breather. I crawled on to the gully, but by the time I got back they were busy planting their mines, working fast and without the slightest sound. Finally the sergeant-major said to me: 'You can sound the retreat, scout. As soon as Anton Fyodorovich Pomiluiiko gets here we'll pull back. He's planting a few German anti-personnel mines in the gully to give the Nazis a taste of their own medicine.'

"A few minutes later the figure of a soldier crawling toward us emerged from the darkness not far away.

'Anton Fyodorovich,' the sergeant-major said in a whisper, 'hurry up there!'

"No sooner had he said that than some jittery German shot up a flare right over the disabled tanks. I could even see the dome of the parachute it was suspended from. I don't know whether the Germans spotted Pomiluiko or not, but a tracer burst got him. He groaned once or twice and then gave a long cry. Only dying men cry like that.

"'Anton Fyodorovich!' cried the sergeant-major and was going to dash up to Pomiluiko, but I pulled him down.

"'Leave me alone!' he hissed. 'Can't you see the man's done for?'

"As if I didn't see that as well as he did! But what was the use losing another man for nothing? The Germans really had the wind up by now. They must have heard the wounded man's cries. They shot up about a dozen flares and began sending their shells over. When our side heard that they got busy too. You ought to have seen the amount of metal that flew over our heads! It hurt to think that a comrade was dying within a few yards of us while we were lying there helpless. But help him we must and there wasn't any time to think about it either.

"The sergeant-major was getting impatient 'Well, what about it?' he said.

"I didn't wait to answer him. I slid out from behind the tank and in one dash I had covered the forty metres and dropped down beside the wounded man. Poor chap, he was in a bad way. His head was thrown back between the humps and he was groaning quietly. I tried to lift him but he cried out, and when I took my hand away it was wet and sticky. Hatred and bitterness welled up inside me until I was fairly choking. A man had lived, loved life

and fought for it, and now here he was dying alone in the darkness. And I swore to myself then and there that I wasn't going to leave him, no matter what happened

"'Anton Fyodorovich!' I said.

"'Water . . .' he gasped. 'Water.'

"I begged him to wait a bit and lay there cursing myself for not being able to think of a way out. But what was I to do? If I tried moving him he'd be bound to cry out. And, after all, I had the lives of the other men to think of. But one thing I knew for certain, we weren't going to leave him there to die alone.

"Just then an idea struck me. It was none too pleasant but there was no other way out. I darted back to the sappers, took a deep breath and said to the sergeant-major 'Looks bad. We can't move him. And those swine won't let us lift our heads for a minute. But we can't stop here either, if we don't want to be trapped. You'll have to take the platoon back. And at once.'

"He wouldn't hear of it at first but I gave him the official line. 'I've got other things to attend to,' I said. 'Got to push on further. You know the way now, so get started!'

"The sergeant-major gave in. 'Good luck!' he said touching my sleeve. 'We'll come back for Anton Fyodorovich, don't worry! We'll give it to those bastards.'

"I waited until they had disappeared and then I took off all extra equipment, stowed it under the tank and made my way back to the wounded man. He must have been pretty far gone by then but when he heard someone beside him he stirred and whispered 'I'm dying. Water. Water.'

"It was no easy matter lifting him without hurting him too much, I can tell you. But after one loud groan at the beginning he went all limp. It took me about ten

minutes to crawl back with him to the tank and by that time I was dripping wet. I laid him down under the tank and was reaching out for my kitbag when my hand touched someone's booted foot. Not a dead foot either. At first I was only surprised, but then it occurred to me that it might be a German and so I backed away quickly, aimed my tommy gun and shouted, without making too much noise: 'Halt! Viper!'

" 'Don't shoot!' says a woman's voice. 'It's me, Tonya Lipilina.' I nearly jumped out of my skin.

" 'Tonya? What Tonya? Never heard of any Tonya. Don't you move there!'

" 'I'm not moving...' says this Tonya. 'I'm the medical orderly. I was with the sappers, you didn't notice me...' 'Oh you were, were you?' I said. I could have strangled that medical orderly with my bare hands at that moment. 'Why didn't you obey orders and go back with the others? Suppose any of them get hurt?'

" 'What's the use of supposing when one of them is hurt right here,' she answered and you couldn't deny there was some sense in what she said. 'Please let me examine him.'

"I just waved my hand. I was pretty sore, I can tell you. But before I had time to collect my thoughts properly this Tonya called me over again. 'Comrade Sergeant... Hear that?' And she began to sob.

"Anton Fyodorovich! I bent my ear to his chest and I could hear his heart beating faintly. Yes, there was still a chance of saving him. Just then the medical orderly let out a frightened whisper: 'Look, the Germans!'

"I glanced around and saw a German quite close to us. He had crawled out from behind a bush and was sticking his neck out, taking his bearings. And the worst

of it was that he came from our side, which meant we were cut off. The single shot from my tommy gun could hardly be heard above the din. The German pulled in his head. The girl whispered: 'Isn't it awful!'

"I was just going to tell her that it wasn't nearly as awful as it was going to be, when Anton Fyodorovich suddenly tried to sit up, groaned and started clawing at the earth.

" 'Hush now,' I said. 'Lie still. . . .' And as if he'd heard me he lay down, his arms went limp by his sides and he didn't move any more. Another man was gone.

" 'Sergeant, Sergeant,' Tonya called. 'They're coming again.'

"But I could see that myself. And there were plenty of them this time, all crawling in our direction. The tank we were lying under stood with its front to the west, and the enemy was advancing from the southeast. I noticed that the front hatch was open, so I dived inside and felt around. The levers, seat and everything else seemed to be in order. We couldn't wish for a better shelter under the circumstances. Especially since there was no choice I called softly to the girl. 'Come in and make yourself comfortable. Only see you don't make any noise.'

"I fastened the hatch and started reconnoitring a bit. It was pitch dark inside that tank and though it wasn't much more than a metre from end to end it was so cluttered up that you could break your neck if you weren't careful. I felt my way to the gun platform. Found the clamp on the upper hatch and made it fast. After that I wanted to smoke, but I knew that was out, so I tried to think of something else. I cocked my ears and heard a heavy gun go off far away, and heard the shell whine and explode. Our heavies were busy. . . . 'Shoot away,' I said to myself.

'Only see you don't hit your own folks.' Now the Germans sent up another flare—you could see the light through the observation slit. Listening, I heard some movement outside. And then some voices. The Germans had taken their bearings and were now having a confab. A minute later some vermin clambered onto my armour. My throat tightened a bit but I tried to calm myself by having an imaginary conversation with him: 'Well,' I says, 'are you going to knock at my door politely or will you try battering the door in? Or perhaps you think there's no one here?' But it all went off all right. The German nosed around a bit more and then slid off the tank and all was quiet again. I sat there feeling all limp and listening to my heart thumping. I felt as if all the strength had gone out of me and all sorts of queer thoughts crowded into my head. I thought of our last dugout, the tent cape and the little shelf over the entrance with the messtin standing on it. That messtin had got badly burned, there was a hole in the bottom. I had intended getting a new one but I never got around to it. Got to get a new tin. . . .

"All of a sudden I sat up with a start. Something had to be done. I wasn't going to wait there and be caught like a rat in a trap. There were Germans all round and if they didn't get us that night they'd be sure to get us tomorrow. I racked my brains for some way out. Gradually the gorge rose up in me so that in another few minutes I was in such a towering rage I could have shouted out: to hell with death! I'm not going to die and I won't let the girl die either! While the Hitlerites were figuring out some sort of private blitzkrieg against me, time was passing, and I'd find some way out as sure as fate. That settled it. I glued my eye to the observation slit. But I couldn't make anything out, except some sort

of movement in the darkness. I felt someone touching my leg. 'What's up?' I whispered angrily. 'Nothing, I just wanted to know whether you were all right,' says the girl. 'Thanks,' I said, 'I'm fine.'

"There was no more talk after that. I suppose I must have dropped off around morning. I did everything I could to keep awake but it didn't help. I started as if someone had shaken me, opened my eyes and saw broad daylight shining in through the observation slit. Time to be up and about, said I to myself. I climbed down into the mechanic's compartment and there was my new friend Tonya curled up in a corner, quiet as a mouse.

"'How do you feel?' I asked her. 'I'm all right,' she said shifting her position. 'Only I'm awfully thirsty....'

"I said something then I'll never forgive myself for. 'Too bad,' I said sarcastically. 'There's no water on tap in this hotel.' 'That's all right,' she said 'I can stand it.'

"I shifted the steel cover from the triplex. But it only moved back halfway and I couldn't shove it any further for the life of me. 'Perhaps you could help,' I said to the girl.

"She came over and pushed the lever with one hand, but of course it wasn't any good.

"'Try both hands,' I suggested. 'I can't,' she says. 'I only have one hand....' Only one hand! I felt my hair stand on end 'Well, not exactly, but you see my left hand is hurt.' 'How hurt?' She sighed 'A bullet, I suppose.... I didn't see what it was.'

"The shock must have given me strength, because the cover slid back and bright daylight came pouring into our iron cage. I turned and looked at the girl—this was the first time I'd seen her, mind—and what I saw made me blink. A face white as marble and two big dark eyes

shining out. I went over and touched her bandaged arm. She winced. 'It hurts so,' she whispered. 'And . . . I'm so thirsty.'

" 'Thirsty!' I seized my flask which had a little water I had been saving for the return journey. 'Drink,' I said. 'Drink it all, I'll get some more.'

"She drank her fill. 'I never thought water could taste so good,' she said handing me back the flask.

"I stood staring at her and suddenly a thought struck me. 'See here,' I said. 'You stayed after you were hit?' She nodded and tried to smile. 'Then why didn't you say anything?' 'I didn't want to . . . bother you.' 'Awfully considerate of you,' I said bitterly. 'Never mind, bear up, we'll soon be out of this.'

"Some days before that we'd moved up artillery of different calibres to this particular sector of the front, and from dawn our gunners began methodically hammering away deep behind the enemy's forward lines. At about ten they laid such a barrage at the fascist forward positions that everything there was churned up. I was already thinking of making use of the fracas to slip back. I looked through the triplex to get the lay of the land. I still remember the funny feeling I had as if I was looking at a battlefield for the first time. Ahead was the rough-edged grey ridge held by the fascists, and along it darker spots where there were trenches and foxholes, and turtle-backed pillboxes. What got me was that for all this good view of the landscape I couldn't tell what was going on right next to the tank. And that happened to be most important for us at the moment. I felt the Germans must be somewhere about—they'd surely be waiting just in case. So I waited too. Overhead a shell went by quite close, and then another whined past.

"I looked around at the girl. She seemed to guess what I had in mind, and was ready to do her share. Reaching into her holster she pulled out a tiny pistol, as if a toy like that was any good in a serious brush with the enemy. 'Take it easy,' I told her, 'don't you think of getting out before I give you the signal.' I dived out of the manhole and as soon as I hit the ground a couple of bullets sang past my ear and then another two. One bullet ricocheted with a whine. I was not mistaken in thinking the fascists would be on the lookout. I hadn't the slightest idea how many there were, and there wasn't much hope of finding out either before they got me. I lay there scanning every hump around until I finally spotted somebody's behind jutting up—some fat shopkeeper probably who thought he was safe because his head was under cover. So I took a bead on that behind and pressed the trigger—you should have seen him jump and yell! That exposed him for a moment and I finally quieted him down for good. But as I did so there were two more thuds next to me and a third bullet seared my temple.

"I shifted my position but I couldn't see anything now. The second was getting smarter. There was nothing for it but to take the chance. Waiting was out of the question, for the Soviet God of War—artillery, you know—was in full action and the earth was rocking under me. I decided to make a dash for it. I raised myself up on my elbow, but just then I heard two shells making straight for where we were. Whether our gunners made a mistake or what it was I don't know, but two whoppers came down some fifty metres away. The splinters rattled against the tank and my head went around and my ears rang. I pulled myself together somehow and knocked at the bottom of the tank. The next moment Tonya jumped down beside

me. We crawled past the two fresh shell holes, and when I saw a pair of legs with short canvas leggings sticking out from under the loose earth I knew that the way was clear. There was no time to lose, but I didn't rush the girl, because she had a hard time of it as it was with only one good arm. And the farther we went the harder it was for her. After a while we stopped to rest in a swampy hollow. Tonya lay on her right side biting a blade of grass and staring ahead in a way that had me scared. I gathered some brownish water lying between the humps in the ground and offered it to her, but after one sip she shook her head. 'I don't want any.'

"I considered we were as good as home because we had almost reached the mine field. Soon we were crawling among the shell-torn bushes. And suddenly Tonya pressed her cheek to the rough grass and closed her eyes. I didn't ask any questions. I picked her up and carried her to the company positions. She was light as a feather, poor thing. What a fuss the boys made over her, everyone offering his flask and his tent cape to cover her with, and there was no end to the advice they had to give.

"Well, that's the story..." Stepan's hand tightened round his now cold cup. "We met a few more times after that ... I was a sniper then. And now Tonya is here in this town. And she is very ill..."

He surveyed the gathering, drank off his cold tea at one gulp and then proceeded to tell about his latest visits to the girl. When he came to Bondarchuk's advice about getting Tonya interested in the life around her, Lukin interrupted him.

"I know what!" He waved away Mitenka who had raised his chairman's pencil warningly. "Let me speak. I suggest we write a letter to Tonya telling all about

ourselves. We can send it through the newspaper or take it to her ourselves, a sort of delegation...."

Mitenka leapt up in excitement.

"Of course, I'll take it to her!"

. But Cherepanov growled at him: "You sit down! Always pushing yourself forward." He turned to Stepan. "Lukin is right," he said. "That's what we'll do. What about you?"

"Me?" Stepan took a deep breath, and as if the matter had been decided long since, he said simply, "I'm going to marry her. I'll see that she gets well."

CHAPTER XXVII

The Voshchins were expecting visitors. Ekaterina Tikhonovna had decided to celebrate her children's homecoming. She and her daughter Galya were busy in the dining room whence came the clatter of dishes and the murmur of voices. Nine-year-old Pavlushka, who had been caught helping himself to some of the delicacies, had been strictly forbidden to come near the table, and he now sat curled up on the trunk between the cupboard and the stove puffing out his cheeks and giving vent every now and then to the exclamation: "Now, that's an idea!"

Afanasi Petrovich watched him out of the corner of his eye with amusement. Guests or no guests, the old miner had spent a whole hour after supper reading the newspaper as was his custom whenever he was home. He read the paper thoroughly from the editorial on page one to the announcements at the back, and while he read no distracting noises were allowed in the house. Now he had laid aside his paper and was slowly and laboriously making some entry in his dog-eared memo pad.

•Grigori was late. Pavlushka, who had been quiet for a few minutes, piped up again, "Now, that's an idea!"

"Here's a better idea, run and switch on the apparatus," suggested Afanasi Petrovich, who out of a deep respect for things technical called everything an "apparatus," from a locomotive to an electric iron.

Pavlushka beamed, skipped across the kitchen and noiselessly opened the dining room door.

"I'm only going to switch on the radio," he said in an injured tone, although neither his mother nor his sister paid the slightest attention to him

A variety of electrical wheezes and splutterings were followed by a brief whistle and then a rich bass was heard singing Gremin's aria from *Eugene Onegin*—And life, and youth, yes, youth, and h-a-a-ppiness!"

"And ha-a-ppiness!" roared Pavlushka, imitating the singer as he re-entered the kitchen carrying an inkwell and his school report card. His "hour of reckoning" was at hand.

"Well, sit down," said his father, leaning his broad chest against the table.

"I've sat down already, pa."

"What was that idea you were boasting about?"

"That was nothing," Pavlushka said with a wave of his hand "I've got another one now."

"Another one, indeed!" Afanasi Petrovich twirled the ends of his moustache "You're full of ideas this evening, aren't you?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Let's hear about them."

"I'm going to be a singer when I grow up!" Pavlushka blurted out.

"A what?"

"A singer, and I'm going to sing over the radio," said the youngster, adding with a defiant sniff: "You see if I don't."

"Well, well.... Have to think about that," Afanasi Petrovich agreed and, unable to hide the merry twinkle in his eyes, he called out to his wife in the dining room "Hear that, Katerina? Hear what Comrade Voshchin has got into his head?"

Had it not been for Pavlushka, Ekaterina Tikhonovna and Afanasi Petrovich would have been very lonely during the war years. Just before the war broke out Galya had gone off to study in the institute. In June, Grigori, his father's hope and pride, had left for the front. A tense, expectant silence settled over the spacious Voshchin home. The news from the front "wrenched the heart," as Voshchin himself had put it; he spent most of his time at the mine, working sometimes two or three shifts running. It was in these dark days that the Kuzbas rang with the fame of drift miner Voshchin, who had begun his career at the Michelson pits. Newspapers and congratulatory telegrams called the veteran miner who had worked in the pit for over 29 years a "guardsman of the rear." During the brief spells he spent at home he would pick up three-year-old Pavlushka in his arms and walk up and down the front garden unconscious of the child's weight. It was at night that the silence was especially noticeable. Ekaterina Tikhonovna would retire early as a rule, soon after she had put her son to bed, but Afanasi Petrovich would sit for hours in front of the radio, his head resting on his huge, horny hands. Seeing him in that position one might have thought he had dozed off, but no sooner would the Moscow call signal come from the loud-speaker than he was alert. And then he would

walk on tiptoe over to the bed and touching his wife's hand lightly, he would whisper: "Hear that, Katerina, we've been giving it to those fascists again."

"A man who has no gladness in his heart is gloomier than the night," he had been wont to say in his younger years.

That first year of the war Afanasi Petrovich himself was gloomier than the night. His heart was hard with hatred for the fascist murderers. Often he would sit Pavlushka on his knee and tell him about the black, stifling hole of a mine in which he had had to work in bygone years.

"Why do you frighten the child?" Ekaterina Tikhonovne would protest. "Can't you tell him a kindlier tale?"

And Afanasi Petrovich would frown. "No, I have no kindly tales to tell."

The German fascist forces were marching on Stalin-grad. There was no news from Grigori, and Galya wrote seldom.

One day just before leaving for work, Afanasi Petrovich said: "Well, mother, you'll have to lend a hand down the mine now. Let's go!"

For nearly three years she worked beside him at the face, and not once did she complain of her aching arms; she might have been a miner all her life, loading trams and sending them moving down the track. It was only after Grigori had written at last from Berlin and the letter had been read by all the neighbours that Afanasi Petrovich had said one day, smoothing down his Russian shirt with its narrow plaited belt:

"Thanks, mother, for everything. . . . I'll manage alone now."

Ekaterina Tikhonovna said nothing, but she raised a corner of her shawl to hide her trembling lips.

Life resumed its even, customary rhythm in the roomy home of Voshchin, the miner. True, Pavlushka gave his parents a little trouble at first. The boy had suddenly shot up and was quite tall for his age; and perhaps because he had grown accustomed to being left to his own devices, and because he felt that his parents' affection was now focussed on himself, he became disobedient and unmanageable. Ekaterina Tikhonovna found him increasingly difficult to talk with: every day he returned from school having made new and extraordinary discoveries.

All her life she had been a hard-working, dependable helpmate to her miner husband, and all her life with him had been spent in the tireless battle with coal which had constantly to be swept out of corners and shaken out of pockets. All her life she had cursed that coal, yet her husband had only to fall sick for a day or two for her to run off to the mine and come back to him with all the latest news. Ekaterina Tikhonovna did not know that for her too life without the mine would be empty and meaningless.

For more than a year after the war they waited for the children to come home. Grigori had not yet been demobilized and Galya was completing her studies at the institute in Sverdlovsk. The two were constantly in their mother's thoughts.

"Let's buy this for Galya, she'd like it," Ekaterina Tikhonovna would say, picking up something attractive in a shop.

Or, as she was going through the trunks, she would turn to her husband:

"I've just ironed some shirts for Grigori . . ."

Afanasi Petrovich spoke little, but latterly his bearing had grown more erect, he carried his head higher, played

with Pavlushka more often and was always busy around the house, making repairs here and there, refurbishing the porch or painting his daughter's bed.

"Just imagine, she's already an engineer," he would observe to his younger son who was hovering around, as he stepped back to admire his handiwork.

Galya was the first to come home. Two days later, on a Sunday, Grigori returned.

The Voshchins welcomed their children standing side by side, arrayed in their best, their stern faces lit up with joy.

The children were home again!

With Galya old Voshchin felt somewhat more awkward than with his son.

"Well, daughter, what're your plans?" he asked her the day she arrived.

She replied briefly that she had an appointment to the local colliery trust, but that she did not expect to remain on the administrative staff; most likely she would go to work at a mine, closer to the coal. And in general she intended to continue her studies while working.

Afanasi Petrovich's eyebrows lifted in surprise, but he said nothing. His heart swelled with pride as he looked at this pretty, somewhat delicate-looking girl who was his daughter, and listened to her calm, deep voice; the memory of the hardships of his own youth faded and he felt that his life had not been wasted. He wanted to stroke her fair fluffy hair, look into her big hazel eyes, and ask her: "What are you thinking about, daughter?..." But Galya sat by the window, her head slightly bent and a faint smile on her lips. Afanasi Petrovich checked the tender impulse and reflected wistfully: "You're growing old, miner."

With Grigori it was quite different at first; he was easier to get along with. Grigori was a chip of the old block; he had his father's nature, and, like him, had both feet firmly planted on the ground. He was just as abrupt in his speech as old Voshchin, he had the same bushy straw-coloured eyebrows, and if something did not please him, his eyes darkened momentarily like his father's.

With Grigori old Voshchin felt altogether at ease. Grigori could do anything with his hands, he was agile in spite of his heavy build, and he took pleasure in amusing Pavlushka. Toward his father and mother he was tender and considerate, and one could feel that he would be a bulwark for them in any adversity.

"You ought to rest for a month or two," Afanası Petrovich suggested to him. "What's your hurry?"

Ekaterina Tikhonovna was constantly at her son's side, patting his shoulder, looking into his eyes, stroking his hands, or with timid compassion touching the fresh scar on his chin.

"Rest, Grigori," she advised him "Forget all about it."

Grigori shook his head.

"I can't forget."

And although he did not discuss the matter, his father and mother knew that they could not persuade him to rest.

Towards his sister, Grigori was thoughtful and considerate. He seemed, indeed, to be observing her as an outsider. He looked in once at the little corner room she occupied, but answered her questions about the war briefly.

"We did our bit of fighting," he would say and change the subject by asking for a book to read.

Galya offered him *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstol. He glanced questioningly at her as he took the book, and when he returned it a week later, said, somewhat vaguely:

"So that's what war was like in those days. And the people, too. . . ." Then he asked. "Why didn't they hang Napoleon?"

Galya explained that the ruling classes in Russia in that historical period took advantage of the victory in the War of 1812 for their own ends. The Russian emperor did not want the French emperor executed for fear that he might be establishing a bad precedent for his own people. But after his defeat in Russia Napoleon was unable to rise again.

Grigori laughed shortly.

"Russian campaigns have always ended badly for foreigners," he remarked.

. Removing her flowered apron, Galya looked into the kitchen and shook her head reproachfully.

"You'd better leave Pavlushka alone, Dad. It's already eight o'clock and you haven't changed yet."

There was no time to lose, for some of the more punctual guests were liable to appear at any moment. And indeed, before they knew it, there were footsteps in the porch and Khmelchenko's voice boomed from behind the door.

"I hope I'm not late. The main thing is to be in time for the vodka and be the first to kiss the hostess."

"Come right in!" the host responded. "As for kissing the hostess, that's a privilege I wouldn't yield to any guest."

Rubbing a frost-nipped ear, Khmelchenko pushed his bulk into the kitchen.

"Hullo there, young Voshchin!" he nodded to Pavlushka. "When are you coming to the pit? We're waiting for you."

"I don't want your old pit!" replied the youngest of the Voshchins, sticking out his lower lip in disdain.

"What's this? Don't tell me you're going to become the head of a Ministry straight off?"

Afanasi Petrovich smiled.

"He aims higher than that!"

"Still higher? I thought that was the limit!"

"He wants to become an actor. . . ."

"No I don't, not any more," Pavlushka interrupted his father. "I've got a better idea. I want to be a flyer."

Voshchin and Khmelchenko looked at each other and laughed heartily.

"Oh yes," the guest reminded himself, "I forgot to tell you, I saw Khomyakov today. He's just back from a health resort. He came dashing down the street towards me with a wild look in his eye and some sort of contraption under his arm and shouted 'Revolution, Comrade Khmelchenko!' and hurried on without stopping to pass the time of day. What could be the matter with the old man?"

"Yes," said Voshchin thoughtfully, "he's never been the same since that business with the shortage in the bunkers."

At that moment Pavlushka, who had taken the opportunity to dart unobserved into the dining room, switched on the radio at full volume and the powerful voice of Chaliapin singing "The Volga Boatmen's Song" shook the room as if announcing the commencement of the festivities.

Khmelchenko clutched at his head, winked to Afanasi Petrovich and went off to pay his respects to the hostess.

Presently the Mukhins, a modest young couple, arrived, they brought a present for their hosts wrapped up in newspaper but, being too shy to offer it, stuffed it behind the rubber plant

At last Grigori came with Nikolai and Annushka in tow. The Dubintsevs spent a long time in front of the small wall mirror sprucing up. Annushka straightened her husband's tie, ordered him to comb his hair and ended by doing it herself, sighing with mock despair at his helplessness.

"It's a nursemaid you need, not a wife."

Nikolai, perspiring with embarrassment, said nothing but pleaded with his eyes, indicating Pavlushka who was looking on critically from behind the kitchen table.

"Will you two ever be ready?" Grigori wanted to know.

"Save me, there's a good fellow!" Dubintsev implored, with a blissful smile. "She'll be the death of me."

Annushka tripped gaily into the dining room on her high heels, but on seeing Galva, whom she had not met before, she stopped short, drew herself up a little and shook hands primly all round. But that did not prevent her some five minutes later from confiding to Galva in great detail how busy she had been that day setting up core drills at the workings and later on getting her husband ready for the party—he was so impossible and

"So nice!" Annushka wound up unexpectedly.

Soon the accordion player arrived. Ekaterina Tikhonovna had invited him herself. "What sort of a party is it without an accordion?" she said. As sick and smooth-haired as a tailor's dummy, this young man settled himself comfortably in a corner, cast a critical eye over the table and the bottles standing on the window sill, jerked his head disdainfully toward the wireless set as much as to

say "stop that noise," and spread out his instrument with its gleaming mother-of-pearl keyboard.

The guests stirred and the conversation grew more lively. Afanasi Petrovich cast anxious glances at the clock and shrugged his shoulders in answer to a questioning look from Grigori. "Can't understand where they are."

Rogov and Bondarchuk were expected.

Having obliged the assembly with a rendering of "In the Frontline Forest," the accordionist allowed his eyes to wander again to the window sill and licked his lips dreamily. At that moment Ekaterina Tikhonovna emerged from the bedroom with a shy smile of welcome. The assembled guests greeted her warmly, and at a sign from the host, they took their seats at the table.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"There is no need for more than one senior engineer to be on duty in the pit at night," Rogov was forever telling his assistants. "What is the sense in all of us wearing ourselves out after regular working hours when we can use our energy to far better purpose during the day?"

But tonight he had broken this rule himself. Khomyakov's project which had suddenly appeared like a bolt from the blue was so incredibly simple and so utterly new that he was impelled to drop everything and sit down then and there to work out the drawings and computations for the principal parts of the machine.

Khomyakov had gone home long since in a state bordering on intoxication, his eyes dimmed with happiness. For a long time silence had reigned outside the office and the dark December night had crept up close to the windows, but still Rogov lingered, now bending over

his drawing board, now rising to pace the room, murmuring as he shouldered through the heavy pall of blue tobacco smoke: "Good for you, old man! You've got a head on your shoulders!"

Rogov sat down and studied the drawings before him, and suddenly a clear vision of the first seam equipped with the new installation rose before him. He saw the thing with its narrow transporter belt stretching the full length of the fifty-metre face, the shuttle—a cutter bar of unusual design and a metre and a half long looking like a vertically mounted band saw—firmly pressed by pneumatic jacks against the seam, and the pyramid-shaped pobedit teeth cutting into the coal. One of the three or four miner-mechanics tending the machine turns a lever, and the motors go over from a bass growl to a high-pitched hum as the cutter bar creeps up the face planing off a layer of coal from one end to the other. The coal falls on the conveyor to flow in an endless black stream into the trams in the gallery. Then the shuttle reverses its direction and is now crawling back toward the other end of the face at the same unchanging, inexorable pace. He saw not four but seven, eight trainloads of coal leaving the pit every day! Multiply that by all the pits in the field, all the mines in the Kuzbas! Within two or three years the very earth of his native land would grow warmer, its people handsomer, gentler, stronger!

Rogov impatiently picked up the telephone only to be informed by the switchboard operator that Bondarchuk was not in his office.

"Get me Filenkov then!"

But Filenkov was not there either. It would be a good thing to get him interested in this. There had been moments of late when he had shown unmistakable signs

of life, his eyes would light up, and he would begin running around and hustling people. Rogov resolved then and there to talk to him about the new machine. But where was he?

He called up Sevastyanov who was on duty at the pit.

"Pavel Gordeyevich? Glad you called! I've just been talking to the sections. The shift is proceeding full steam ahead. It's a pleasure to hear the reports. If this keeps up we'll be five days ahead of the plan." He stopped short as he suddenly remembered something. "I thought you were going to the Voshchins tonight? Weren't you?"

Voshchin! Rogov hung in the middle of the sentence. What a shame! How could he have forgotten? The old man would be offended. He had dropped in three times to invite him. What time was it now? Ten o'clock. Two hours late.

As he neared the Voshchin house he suddenly slackened his pace. "What's your hurry?" he asked himself, and chuckled. Never mind. I need a rest, don't I? And then they're such fine people."

He was taking off his things in the hallway when someone peeped out of the dining room and cries of joy and surprise came from the inner room, then the voices and the music were hushed and there was the sound of chairs being pushed back. Atanas Petrovich came out to greet him.

"Thanks, son, for coming. I thought you'd forgotten!" the old man was visibly moved as he pressed Rogov's hand warmly.

Khmelchenko appeared. "Well, well, the chief himself! Come in and get closer to the masses!"

Grigori, whose greeting was less effusive, informed Rogov that Bondarchuk was already there.

Rogov indeed had already caught a glimpse of the

Party organizer seated on a sofa in the shade of the rubber plant talking animatedly to a girl with ash-blond hair. The girl was laughing softly. She looked up as Rogov entered and nodded to him in greeting. "Sit down here, Pavel Gordeyevich," she said, shaking hands. "Let me get a good look at you."

"Not a very interesting occupation," replied Rogov. "I'm rather a morose sort of chap."

Bondarchuk laughed.

"Don't you believe him, Galya. He has a tender heart. Sit down, Pavel Gordeyevich."

For an instant Rogov's eyes met the girl's and he discovered that she was amazingly good to look at.

"Straight from the pit?" the Party organizer inquired. "How goes it down there?"

Rogov remembered Khomyakov and launched into an excited account of the mine surveyor's invention, unaware that the hushed company was listening to him and that the accordionist, his lower lip stuck out, was impatiently clicking his keys.

Bondarchuk flushed with pleasure. "Why, man!" he said, "that will complete the mechanization of the mining process from face to surface!"

"It appears the old man has been working on the idea for a whole year," Rogov went on, warming to his subject. He whipped out his notebook and began to sketch a hasty outline of the project. "Look, the only shortcoming in this brilliant project is the timbering. I didn't say anything about that to Gerasim Petrovich yet, because I didn't want to discourage him. But if we could add mobile timbering, can you see what a tremendous thing we would have? This is not just a fantastic notion, it is a matter of practical engineering."

"Yes, yes!" Bondarchuk sprang up and was about to say something else when, at a wink from Grigori, Voshchin the elder separated the two men by planting himself firmly between them.

"That's enough, that's enough!" he declared raising his hands. "Anyone would think you hadn't seen each other for a whole month! Now, comrades, let's begin to celebrate in real earnest!"

To the accompaniment of intricate harmonies from the accordion the festivities got underway again. Galya, seated opposite Rogov, was looking from him to Bondarchuk with an expression of warm approval on her face. Annushka, too, pressed close to her Nikolai's shoulder, gazed at Rogov. Noticing the smile trembling on her lips, he shook a finger at her.

"Annushka, don't you look at me like that or I'll start making love to you!"

Whereupon Nikolai stuck out his chest belligerently to the vast amusement of the company. Glasses were raised. Khmelchenko got up and surveyed the assembly.

"Let us drink to the mother who has brought up such splendid Communists! Long and happy life to you, dear Ekaterina Tikhonovna! May you live to raise your grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

"Great-grandchildren, gracious me!" Ekaterina Tikhonovna hid her happy smile with a corner of her shawl.

"One moment!" Grigori rose to his feet. "One moment!"

"Grigori!" Afanasi Petrovich tapped his glass with his fork warningly.

"No," Grigori said with his head bent at a stubborn angle. "Galya and I don't see why we should keep it a

secret. Comrades..." he ran his eyes over the guests. "Comrades, we have another important reason for celebrating tonight. It is twenty-five years since mother and father were married. I am proud..." Grigori faltered, then wound up to the accompaniment of applause, "I am proud to be their son!"

Afanasi Petrovich and Ekaterina Tikhonovna seated at the head of the table looked pensive. They seemed to be looking back over the long path they had trod side by side, thinking of all the cares and joys they had shared in their life together, of the children they had brought up and put on their feet.

There was much that Afanasi Petrovich might have told these good folk here about his life, and it would have been well for his children to hear too . . . He did not want to speak about his whole life; but there was one incident he remembered now that he would have liked to relate.

It had happened in the mine during the war. The timber had been held up somewhere and the seam had to be urgently propped up. He cursed a little under his breath, and ordered his wife to stay and keep an eye on the seam while he went off to look for the timbermen. Returning half an hour later he had heard an ominous sound coming from the seam. He felt his knees tremble and the blood rush to his head.

"Katerina! Katerina!" he shouted.

But the noise of falling rock was all he heard in reply.

He rushed in to find that the roof had begun to slip, huge chunks of rock were falling, and there was his wife standing right at the face trying to stop the fall with a three-metre prop. He seized her by the arm and dragged her out just in time.

"What do you think you're doing, crazy woman?" he shouted at her in his excitement.

"For goodness' sake, man," she sighed, "you told me to stay there, didn't you? I tried to stop it from falling, but I suppose I'm too old, haven't got the strength. . . ." Ekaterina Tikhonovna had wiped her frightened, perspiring face and suddenly burst into tears.

Afanasi Petrovich did not relate the incident now. Instead he stroked his wife's toil-worn hands and said with a laugh:

"She is the only one in the family who's not a Party member. Let's drink to the bloc of the Communists and the non-Party people!"

"Hey, what about the Young Pioneers!" Pavlushka shouted from the kitchen. A roar of laughter met this sally. Rogov clinked glasses with Galya.

"Here's to the Young Pioneers!"

Pavel Gordeyevich was enjoying the evening immensely. He felt completely at home here. He glanced frequently at Bondarchuk, noting that his eyes too were shining. He proposed a toast for the miners who were that very moment storming the face, and observing at the same time the way the Party organizer nodded in reply to Galya's unspoken question, he thought: "They appear to have known each other for a long time."

Dubintsev was saying something about Filenkov.

"He's all right," Grigori remarked. "A bit of a wet blanket, though."

"Stop gossiping about your chiefs!" Galya cried gaily, and lowering her eyes, she began to sing.

Everyone stopped talking to listen. She sang a song they all knew, a song that conjured up visions of rugged crags, dense forests and the rippling expanses of Lake

Baikal, and a little fishing boat slipping by in the shadow of an overhanging rock.

Bondarchuk nudged Rogov with his elbow: "Isn't she good? Let's join in."

They sang a great many songs and they could have gone on singing endlessly. Afterwards Afanasi Petrovich made a speech, a slightly incoherent speech, the gist of which was that it was good to live in your native land, when you knew you were doing useful work, and when you had grown-up sons who worked side by side with you.

"Side by side!" Afanasi Petrovich repeated with a stern glance at Grigori.

But Grigori pretended that the remark did not concern him.

Ekaterina Tikhonovna sighed happily and shed a furtive tear from time to time.

It's good to live when you know your life hasn't been wasted!

It was quite late when the guests took their leave. Rogov walked down the steps to the white path and lifted his hot flushed face to the cool snow flakes while he waited for Bondarchuk. As he stood there he found himself for some reason making a firm resolve to wire Valya at once. Her patience was truly amazing. She had not written for a long time.

Grigori came out with Bondarchuk.

"So we're going to begin?" he asked, pressing Rogov's hand.

"Why, of course!" the engineer confirmed. "Have you spoken to your father?"

"I have . . ." Grigori gave an embarrassed cough. "You know him. . . . But I think it will all blow over."

As they walked down the street with the lights of Kapitalnaya glowing not far off Rogov said:

"What shall we do now? Shall we look in at the pit? I could show you the drawings and the model of Kholmjakov's proposal."

Bondarchuk laughed. "I thought the mine chief didn't approve of working at night? Better leave it till morning."

"All right," Rogov sighed. "We'll leave it till morning."

CHAPTER XXIX

During the first few shifts underground after his return from the army, Grigori had felt like a stranger in the mine. He actually behaved like a novice, crouching where he could have walked upright and working at a feverish pace to hide his awkwardness. His father noticed all this but said nothing.

On the other hand, Grigori was extremely shrewd in sizing up his fellow workers. Once while listening to Ocheredko speaking at a meeting, he scornfully remarked: "Chairwarmer."

"And what would you say about that one?" Voshchin senior asked his son after Rogov had taken the floor.

"I'd say it must have been good to fight under his command," Grigori replied after a moment's hesitation. "I had a talk with him the other day."

"A talk? What about?" the father asked in some surprise.

But at that point the meeting broke up and it was not until they were on their way home that Grigori answered his father's question

"I asked him to help me with something."

"With what?"

"An idea of mine . . . I want to try driving several headings at once. The multiface method, you know. You yourself often complain about being held up because of ventilation and the supply of empties and timber. That idle time ought to be made use of somehow."

"So you just up and went right ahead with it, eh? Didn't even bother to ask my advice?"

Grigori was amazed. "I'm doing just what you've always taught me to do."

But Afanasi Petrovich refused to give in. "Of course," he said with biting sarcasm, "you know better, you've travelled in foreign lands "

Grigori's eyes darkened for a moment making his resemblance to his father even more marked

"That has nothing to do with it," he muttered through clenched teeth "And you know it They're coming here from foreign lands to learn from us now."

But Afanasi Petrovich did not hear. He quickened his pace and strode ahead up the hill without looking back, stepping heavily on his heels in the manner of old men

For several days Grigori made no further mention of his plan, but the old man felt that he was stubbornly nursing his idea and waiting for his father's resentment to subside before discussing it further Common sense had told Afanasi Petrovich at once that his son was right, that he would have done exactly the same in his place, but his pride would not let him accept such a display of independence. Too long had he waited for the day when Grigori would return, looked forward to working many years together at the face, so that the ebbing strength of Afanasi Voshchin might thus be imperceptibly fused with the growing strength and skill of his son And now life had

altered all that. And there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Afanasi Petrovich knew that, and if he continued to grumble it was perhaps because unconsciously he sought to hide his secret concern for the success of the plan. "Go ahead and grumble," he kept telling himself, "that's all an old man like you is fit for "

It was noon, and the rosy light of the wintry sun streamed in through the double windowpanes. A tortoise-shell kitten perched on a chair in the sun was engrossed in the business of washing itself. Pavlushka, seated on the floor in a patch of sunlight, was filling two pencil boxes with diverse school paraphernalia—pen nibs, pencils, dividers, enough to fill another two boxes. He shrugged his shoulders and spilled the entire contents back into his schoolbag.

"Stop that rattle-banging," said Afanasi Petrovich reprovingly.

"Rattle-banging . " Pavlushka sniffed. "Some word What language is that, Dad?"

Afanasi Petrovich made no reply as he fingered his faded red moustache and glanced furtively in Grigori's direction.

It would soon be time to go to work, but meanwhile everyone was intent on his own affairs. Grigori was sketching something in a school drawing album. His stiff fingers wielded the pencil awkwardly. He bit the end of the pencil and compressed his lips

"That engineer from the trust made a mistake. How can I show these calculations to Pavel Gordeyevich? He's bound to ask me what happened to those forty minutes in the third face."

Afanasi Petrovich laid aside his newspaper and looked at his son out of the corner of his eye.

"So you've made up your mind definitely about that . . . er. . . multiface business?" he asked.

"Haven't you always taught me to make up my mind definitely?"

Afanasi Petrovich pulled at his chin, his shoulders hunched.

"So I'm to be alone again?" For a moment a weary, defeated expression flickered in the old man's eyes.

His son stretched his hand out to him across the table.

'Now, Dad! You know you would never forgive me if I didn't try out my idea in practice. How can you say you're alone? Why, if it wasn't for your speed schedule I wouldn't be able to get anywhere. Now we're writing a letter to Stalin. . . For all you know, we might be able to tell him about this new thing too!'

"You can't stick any half-baked notions in that letter!" Afanasi Petrovich got up and began to pace the room. "You want too much, my lad. . . I'm adding my bit to the letter, but look how many months I worked on it, polishing it up until it was near perfect. What do you think Joseph Vissarionovich will do? He'll read the letter, and then he'll call in the engineers and he'll say: 'Now let's see what those people in the Kuzbas have to say, especially in that Kapitalnaya pit. About tunnelling, eh? They haven't overdone it by any chance—three hundred metres a month—what do you think?' He'll ask the engineers but, of course, he himself has figured it all out long ago, and decided what has to be changed in the plans and whom to urge on, because it's a sure thing!" Afanasi Petrovich stretched out his hands: "Tried and tested with these here! And what've you got? Nothing but blueprints!"

Grigori knitted his brows.

"That's just it, I want to have more than blueprints. I'm going to start . . . today."

"Today? This shift?" With a shake of his shaggy head, Afanasi Petrovich strode out of the room, treading on Pavlushka's pencils as he went.

An hour later they sat down to dinner. Galya was late today and Ekaterina Tikhonovna kept glancing anxiously toward the door. Pavlushka, with his head bent over his plate, giggled to himself—the kitten was rubbing itself against his bare feet under the table. Pushing the pie toward Grigori, Afanasi Petrovich asked:

"Have you everything ready? Or do you think you can just go ahead—whizz-bang and the percentages will come pouring down by themselves?"

Grigori looked hurt. "You know very well I don't think anything of the sort. Haven't you seen how much time I've spent at the faces with Pavel Gordeyevich, calculating and figuring over and over again? If you'd like to know, I might have given up the whole idea if it hadn't been for Rogov. You know him, once he gets his teeth into something he won't let go so easily."

It was the father's turn to bristle.

"What do you mean, give up the idea? What are you talking about?" he hastily wiped his moustache and, beckoning to Grigori to follow him, went out of the kitchen. He produced a small package from his coat pocket and with an air of mystery proceeded slowly to open it.

There on his palm lay something that resembled the half-opened blossom of a water lily with a bluish metallic sheen.

"A core bit!" gasped Grigori. "Let's see it!"

Yes, it was a core bit, but an oval-shaped one of a kind Grigori had never seen before. Those he had been accustomed to use had an even circular cutting edge, but this looked like some unfolding flower. While he admired the beauty of the bit, Grigori realized at once that the value of it lay in its stream-lined shape. Closing his fingers over it, he lifted his eyes in gratitude to his father.

"Your invention?"

Afanasi Petrovich sniffed to hide his confusion and shook his head.

"I'm too old to think of anything like that. . . . That's young Cherepanov's idea, it's him the miners will have to thank. You take it and try it out since you have the opportunity."

Grigori pondered this for a while. Then with a rueful expression he handed it back to his father.

"Think it won't work?" the old drift miner asked quickly.

"Oh, it'll work all right," Grigori replied. Slowly he lit a cigarette and squinting through the smoke added firmly: "You can't doubt a thing like that. But you're the one who's going to try it out. The lad entrusted it to you, because you're more skilled. For all you know I might bust the thing."

"Bust it!" roared Afanasi Petrovich suddenly. "I'll bust you! A fine excuse! Take it, I tell you, take it and use it, or else I'll tell Rogov about this . . . this . . . delicacy of yours."

And as he stumped down the steps Ekaterina Tikhonovna heard him still muttering angrily: "Delicacy! Bahl!"

"Old man's on the rampage!" remarked Pavlushka and earned a good scolding from his mother for such disrespect.

Grigori was both surprised and upset when Paulina Ivanovna told him that Rogov had gone to the workers' dormitories early that morning and had not yet returned. Bondarchuk had gone with him.

So, Rogov wouldn't be there. But what did he want Rogov for? Did he expect the chief to lead him by the hand to the face? No, it wasn't that. Still, he felt lost without his chief's advice. Only yesterday Rogov and he had spent a good three hours after the shift inspecting the headings. Or, rather, Grigori had been doing the inspecting and Rogov had trailed behind. But although the engineer made no notes you could see that his memory photographed every detail in the timetable the miner had drawn up. The chief had only one remark to make.

"Somehow you've lost half an hour in the second heading," he had observed, glancing at the sheet of paper over Grigori's shoulder. "Figure it out yourself, you're not a child," he had added when the miner looked nonplussed.

But how could he have forgotten that today Grigori was facing his first real test? The young miner was sunk in troubled thoughts until a blast from the fan woke him to the fact that he had arrived at the working. For a moment it seemed to him that he had forgotten the whole plan, that the carefully elaborated scheme had fallen apart, that what had been so nice and smooth on paper might not work out in practice. . . .

This feeling, however, persisted only until four o'clock. The hands of his watch had not yet reached the long-awaited hour when Grigori Voshchin attached the Cherepanov core bit to a drill and switched it on. And perhaps it was because everything did not run smoothly, at least not quite according to his timetable, that Grigori mustered

all his will power, grit his teeth and went at it with might and main, flinging caution to the winds.

He worked alternately in two main drifts and one crosscut. The former were cut half in rock while the crosscut ran through coal. In the main drifts there were mechanical loaders, and hence the miner's physical and mental powers were concentrated here on the proper placing of the boreholes, on clearing the face and timbering. In the third working he had to load the coal by hand besides.

In one of the main drifts, No. 5, where he began the shift, everything went smoothly, but in the second, No. 8, the foreman warned him that he shouldn't rely too much on the additional suction fan; it was acting queer.

"You're queer yourself, man," Grigori retorted in passing.

Having drilled No. 8 and then the crosscut, he returned to No. 5 an hour later. The blaster had already gone, but Grigori saw that he had done his job well—the loosened rock had come down nicely within the grasp of the mechanical loader. The only thing that was not visible was how neatly the foot of the breast had been sliced off.

Grigori started the loader. At that moment district engineer Nefedov ran in, flashing his lamp at the miner's face and smiling encouragingly.

"Got it going? Good chap! Keep it up," he shouted to make himself heard above the din. "I'll send you a couple of helpers just in case. Let me know if you need more."

The miner stopped the loader with a gesture of annoyance and turned to the engineer.

"Carry on, I don't want to interfere," the latter hastened to say.

"That's just what you're doing," Grigori waved him away, frowning. "I don't want any helpers. I've got to work this thing out by myself and I don't want a single extra worker around."

Nefedov laughed heartily.

"Tough lad, aren't you!" he shouted as he receded down the drift.

"Tough..." sighed Grigori. As he could see it, this particular "tough lad" wasn't doing so well. For some reason or other the rock kept jamming the drive gear of the conveyor. "Father also complains about it. Got to find the time to look at the innards of this contraption."

Grigori's hands shook a bit—not from exhaustion, but from excitement, for now the work was proceeding exactly as he had planned. As he started on his second round, he called over the foreman and, his eyes flashing, said in a low voice:

"Get me a three-metre prop, will you? Quick, though!"

The foreman shook his head dubiously. •

"You'd better look out, Grigori Afanasyevich, or you'll get into trouble. There's a limit to the time the roof of a heading like this will hold. For all you know it might trap you."

"Just let it try!" Grigori said. "I'll take care of that. Once I've started I might as well see it through. Let's have the drill."

Grigori knew, of course, that the whole pit was keenly interested in the tryout of his method, but he had not foreseen the high pitch that interest would reach toward evening.

"We're trying out the multiface method today..." Mikhail Cherepanov boasted to Yemelyanov over the phone. "Voshchin's at it. No, not Afanasi Petrovich. Gri-

gori. What? Nothing'll come of it? Don't be funny. If Kapitalnaya's doing it, it will work out. . . ."

Telephones were ringing incessantly on the desk of the engineer on duty and in the dispatcher's office; there were calls from the trust and the City Committee of the Party asking how things were coming along. Even the leader of the amateur art ensemble at the club called; he made a nuisance of himself by phoning repeatedly to ask whether he could include details about Voshchin's showing in the program to be given that day.

Rogov followed the progress of work from a distance, but no less attentively for all that. At three o'clock he asked the engineer on duty:

"Is everything in readiness?"

And exactly an hour later:

"Has he started?"

Another hour passed and he was asking Nefedov:

"How is Grigori making out?"

When he heard that young Voshchin had refused Nefedov's offer to send two helpers he did not laugh as the district engineer had expected, but said sternly:

"Now listen here, don't try to be a nursemaid. It won't work, and in this case it would even be harmful. You don't think it was just an accident that I wasn't around, do you? I would advise you not to butt in more than is absolutely necessary. Grigori must be made to feel that he is running the show, especially today. That's where the real value of experience lies. You just see to it that there are plenty of empties and also attend to the props so there shouldn't be a minute's delay in timbering."

By nine o'clock it was known that Grigori had doubled the quota in each of the workings, making a total of

six complete cycles. Party Bureau member Nekrasov who was on duty in the mine on Bondarchuk's instructions helped to pass this information around. He did not ask Grigori any questions. He would merely appear somewhere nearby and stand watching for ten minutes or so, then move on again without touching anything or saying a word. On the way he would drop in on the Komsomol crew, remarking in passing to Mitenka and Lukin who were working together that the multiface method seemed to be working out very well, and then go on to Afanasi Petrovich.

"What's ailing you?" the old miner had asked him a couple of times. "Got insomnia or what? You're on the morning shift, aren't you?"

Nekrasov sat down on a spare rail.

"Sure, but it doesn't matter," he replied. "At our age you don't need so much sleep. I feel much better down here looking around . . . I was just in to see your Grigori. . . ."

Afanasi Petrovich went on hammering a prop into place with an air of concentration, but his face was tense with anticipation.

This did not escape Nekrasov who smiled to himself and continued:

"He's chalked up his second cycle. . . . Doing nicely, he is, according to plan."

Afanasi Petrovich cleared his throat. He wanted to dash off at once to where his son was working, lay his hand on the lad's sweaty shoulder, look things over and offer his advice. Yet he could not do it; he had his own work to think of, and then Grigori would be offended and might say: "What're you hovering over me for!" So Afanasi Petrovich said:

"He's always had a good head on his shoulders, even as a kid."

About ten or half past, Nekrasov came in again.

"Not bad, not bad at all..." he said in the same tone as before.

The old miner, however, pricked up his ears: why this tone, anyway, as if they were trying to reassure him? Couldn't they be more definite about it?

Nekrasov thought it over for a moment, then launched on a discussion of his own ideas on the matter. It turned out that when Grigori was doing his third round the rock drifts had begun to act queer - the roof had begun to ring hollow.

Nekrasov did not come into Afanasi Petrovich's working again. The old miner carefully cleared the face, added another section to the narrow-gauge track and set out for the surface. At the main shaft he bumped into the foreman from Grigori's section.

"Well, how was it?" he asked casually.

The foreman made a gesture of chagrin.

"Not so good.... It wasn't natural to drive so hard."

Afanasi Petrovich entered the dispatching office. Four members of the Cherepanov crew were standing against one wall, among them Milenka, who was gesticulating excitedly as he watched the timekeeper on duty take down a streamer with the words: "The miners' greetings to Grigori Voshchin, the noted..."

Afanasi Petrovich's eyes narrowed and he spun around, but he nevertheless managed to retain his self-control. He took his time washing up, then went to the section office to take a look at the report for the shift, and only after that headed for home although his heart and his thoughts had been there long ago

He knocked at the porch door. Ekaterina Tikhonovna opened it without a word and practically tiptoed back into the kitchen. Afanasi Petrovich followed

"Well, how is he?" his eyes conveyed the wordless question.

She nodded toward Grigori's room

"Sleeping?"

"Not him Sits up holding his head "

"Holding his head!" Afanasi Petrovich snorted as he pulled off his rubber boots "He'd better use it to think with!"

CHAPTER XXX

They had been inspecting the workers' quarters since early morning and the more they saw the darker Rogov's face became, while Bondarchuk kept clearing his throat and shifting his cap from one side of his head to the other. The living quarters indeed left much to be desired, especially those intended for the new arrivals. The chairman of the mine trade union committee declared that the people in the housing department were a lot of lazy and incompetent good-for-nothings.

One of the hostels had had no coal for two days and the rooms were clammy with cold. An official from the housing department babbled something about the allowance having been used up, but catching Rogov's blazing eyes he almost shouted "I'll heat the place, comrade chief! I'll do it right away!"

"And report to the personnel department when you've done it!" snapped Rogov. "You'll be prosecuted for this!"

Outside Bondarchuk gave vent to his feelings

"A downright disgrace!"

"Yes, someone ought to get it hot for allowing such things to happen."

"Who is the someone?"

"I meant myself, but after all it concerns you too in some measure. . . ."

"Yes, but you must admit that you are chiefly to blame for the miners' hostel being left without coal. Who took away the horses the municipal department needed for carting timber?"

The next hostel they visited was a two-story brick building. They were met at the entrance by the superintendent, an effusive young man in semi-military garb. The tips of his well-cared-for black moustache bristled on either side of his pear-shaped nose, giving his rather stupid face an extremely dashing look. Without waiting for any questions to be asked, the superintendent rattled off:

"Everything in order here except for a few vermin," he said, blinking rapidly. "Where the cockroaches come from, or the bedbugs too for that matter, is a mystery to me."

"Have you tried solving it?" Bondarchuk asked.

"The comrade superintendent is too busy swilling vodka to solve mysteries" came a voice from within. The next moment the jolly wizened little face of old hewer Mishikhin peeped out of the doorway. He was a great favourite at the mine for his quick wit and his cheerful disposition. He shook hands with the visitors and pointed to his bandaged foot.

"Our safety first boys let me down that time," he said.

Rogov knew about the accident and asked the miner how the foot was mending.

Mishikhin shrugged his shoulders. "Slowly. . . . It takes time for the bone to knit. . . ."

"Now, this man would make a first-rate superintendent," Rogov mentally decided. "The lad with the whiskers can go and mine coal." He turned to the chief of the Workers' Supply Department "And now, take us to your greenhouse."

Rogov and Bondarchuk were genuinely delighted by this bit of midsummer nestling in a small snow-bound valley. Women workers were gathering baskets of green cucumbers, golden-hued tomatoes were ripening on the shelves, and the slender tops of onions were reaching out to the rays of the electric sun. In the midst of frigid December all this fruitful abundance seemed unreal, and it was hard to believe that it would not disappear at a touch of the hand. Munching a fresh cucumber with relish, the chief of the Workers' Supply Department told the visitors that he had been the first to set up the greenhouses, and related how he had done it. All this was nothing, he assured the visitors, compared to what they were going to do in the future. They were a bit short of glass at the moment, but they would be getting some in a month or two. Ivan Pavlovich had promised to send over a dozen crates from Prokopyevsk, and the Kuzedeyev cooperative store had a supply too.

While they were talking, a round-faced young woman in a linen apron approached. Rogov noticed that her eyelids were red from weeping and that her full red lips were quivering.

"You here again?" the Supply Department chief accosted her sternly. "I thought I told you I never alter my decisions. You've earned that reprimand and you'll get it."

"Comrade chief . . ." the girl said, but for some reason she looked at Rogov and Bondarchuk. "Comrade chief, it was such a wonderful idea . . ."

"I'm not interested in your ideas," the chief interrupted her. "You see, Pavel Gordeyevich," he explained, turning to Rogov, "we have only about 120 square metres of space in the greenhouse, which means that every centimetre has to be utilized to the full, in Stakhanovite fashion, so that we can gather not less than two harvests in the course of the winter. And this dreamer here went and planted nearly five metres to flowers although I had strictly forbidden it. Flowers, mind you! Here we are trying to grow enough green onions for the miners' soup, and she wants to grow dahlias, bluebells, and heaven knows what else! People do get the craziest notions. . . ."

Rogov stole a quick glance at Bondarchuk and made no comment. But as they were leaving the greenhouse he surprised the supply chief by saying:

"I don't know what you're going to do about that reprimand—although if you ask me the girl deserves quite the opposite—but within a month from now we'll expect you to have flowers. That, of course, does not exclude onions, tomatoes and cucumbers. That girl thought of something you and I overlooked, she evidently knows how much a bouquet of fresh flowers means to a miner after a hard shift. Let's have more flowers for Kapitalnaya!"

When they had taken leave of the crestfallen supply chief, Rogov invited the Party organizer to his place, adding that he had not been home since the previous day.

"So I see. . ." Bondarchuk remarked, eyeing the large bare room with distaste. While his host prepared tea, he paced up and down the room, wrinkling his nose in disapproval.

"Time you got married, if you ask me. . . ."

"Wha-at!"

"Time you got married, I said!" the Party organizer repeated irritably.

Rogov bristled. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Can't you find anyone to suit you?"

"I don't think the matter exactly comes under your jurisdiction."

Bondarchuk stopped in his tracks.

"Tut-tut, how touchy we are!" But his features softened and he smiled to himself, dropping his eyes slowly and twitching his broad eyebrows in that peculiar way of his. "I mentioned marriage only by the way. The main trouble really is that some of us don't know how to live"

"You mean me?"

"I mean myself too partly. . . ."

"Stop preaching and have a cup of tea!" said Rogov curtly.

Bondarchuk took a sip of tea, burning his lips on the edge of the aluminum cup. He bit into a piece of sugar and smiled.

"What are you grinning about?" Rogov demanded angrily. "The flower incident amuses you? Think I ought to have waited till summer?"

Bondarchuk shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see why my smile should irritate you so. I was smiling at something I just remembered. . . ."

"No, it's the flowers!" Rogov insisted. "I maintain that it is high time we grew flowers around here. Show me a section today that hasn't topped its plan if only by a few per cent. We've got things moving, you can't deny that. Look. . ." he quickly unrolled a table of statistics "Look, Victor, ninety-eight per cent of all the workers are fulfilling their quotas, and sixty-three per cent of them are Stakhanovites Well, what do you say to that, eh?"

Bondarchuk laughed.

"I know. I know all about it. What's all the excitement about? I haven't dropped from the skies...." Gazing with pleasure at Rogov's well-knit figure he suppressed a smile as he asked cautiously: "Don't you think we'll soon have to be making another sharp turn?"

"A turn?" Rogov paused to ponder this. "We have any amount of turnings ahead of us. What exactly do you have in mind?"

The Party organizer seated himself opposite Rogov and outlined his idea to him, smoothing the tablecloth with his lean dry fingers as he spoke.

"Kapitalnaya is producing only fifty-three per cent of coking coal, the rest is steam coal. Now, the districts and sections in the mine try to turn out more steam coal and less coking coal. That sort of thing is taken for granted nowadays. Since the coking coal comes mainly from the lower level and is harder to get at, there is a tendency to make sure of plan fulfilment by concentrating towards the end of the month on the coal that can be obtained with the least trouble."

Rogov moved his chair impatiently.

"Why must you tell me this? You know I signed an order last week demanding coking coal primarily. From now on the amount of coking coal mined will be the criterion of good work."

"Right," Bondarchuk narrowed his eyes slightly as if trying to recall something. "Right, Pavel. But let's look at this rationally. We know that coking coal is the biggest thing in the state plan. Don't you think it's time we were bringing up to the surface not fifty-three, but seventy, ninety per cent? Don't you think so?"

Rogov shrugged his shoulders. "You can't decide a thing like that on the spur of the moment!"

Considering the matter settled, he was about to pick up the telephone when Bondarchuk restrained him.

"Think it over," he said.

Rogov pushed aside the telephone, got up and walked up and down the room.

"This means more than simply making adjustments within the limits of the plan," he said. "To shift the centre of gravity of all the operations to the bottom level would require thorough preparation, not to speak of revising technology completely. You know very well that all the lower Polkashtin seams are flat, and thicker too. To convey the coal from there you'd have to reorganize the whole transport system. Two inclined shafts are enough for the upper levels, but to get at the bottom another shaft would have to be sunk. In any case all that is taken care of by the general plan. It's the natural thing to do and hence quite inevitable."

Bondarchuk nodded, but it was obvious that he was not satisfied.

There was a knock at the door and Danilov came in

"Hope I'm not intruding," he said, hastily removing his coat and hat. He poured himself a mug of tea and drank it down in a few quick gulps. His eyes were shining, but there was a slightly guarded look about them.

"Have some more tea," Rogov offered. "The cup that cheers. . . ."

"You don't seem any too cheerful yourself."

"We're discussing important affairs of state. . . ."

"Yes, so we are," said Bondarchuk gravely, tapping the bottom of his empty mug with a spoon

"I know!" Rogov frowned. "I know all about it. But, if we want to advance we must take into account the concrete production conditions. . . ."

"Concrete production *tasks*, you mean," the Party organizer put in firmly. "And, of course, the conditions. That goes without saying. The situation is certainly ripe for this new step. The sixth coke battery is going up in Stalinsk, in Kemerovo the old ovens are being replaced by new and more powerful ones—and all this in the Kuzbas alone! Who do you think will be expected to provide coking coal first?"

Rogov sprang up. "Let them make use of their own reserves first!" he burst out, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

The Party organizer raised his eyebrows. "How is that? We produce coal, don't we?"

"We do," Rogov replied. "We are giving the coke people treasure beyond price, but they have taken a very strange stand. Look what is happening in all branches of the national economy: new and more perfected methods of work are being introduced everywhere. But the coke people, supported by the iron and steelmakers, insist on regarding their field as an untouchable holy of holies!"

As always in moments of emotional stress, Rogov's face grew pale and drawn. He spoke with hardly a gesture, relying on the force of his logic to carry his point. Such vehemence could come only from a deep inner conviction.

"It is time," he went on, "to get rid of the obsolete idea that good metallurgical coke can be obtained only if your oven charge contains eighty-five or ninety per cent of the rarer kinds of coal. Technically speaking, that idea is sheer nonsense, because it suggests that the coking process is to all intents and purposes something beyond human

control, just as if it had been devised not by man but Her Majesty Nature. We must act on the inner properties of coals, break them up and recast them, and not kowtow to them. This is not a joke. The range of coals that can be used for coking must be expanded—this is our sacred duty to the future of our country's industry. And has anyone ever honestly declared that it cannot be done? After all, life itself has shown such 'principles' to be untenable. During the past ten years more and more gas coal has gone into coke ovens and the quality of the coke has not been any the worse for it. Some time before the war Academician Pavlov proved in Magnitogorsk that it was possible to use up to forty per cent of all gas coals for coking. That's how things stand!"

Bondarchuk's glance dropped to his upturned palms and he closed his eyes so tight that the short thick eyelashes pressed into the delicate skin of the eyelids. When he looked up at Rogov again his eyes were smiling and his voice had a slight tremor.

"You know, Pavel Gordeyevich," he said, winking at Stepan, "we ought to go to the regional technical conference the Party has called with that idea of yours!"

"So you see the point?" Rogov brightened up.

"That is only one of the ways," Bondarchuk interrupted him. "And it does not rule out the need to increase the output of the coal in short supply. On the contrary, it confirms that need. You see that yourself, don't you?"

Rgov sighed tiredly.

"Of course I see it. But in our conditions the chances of success are slight."

"But you yourself say that things have started moving at the mine and that all your forces have been mustered," Bondarchuk insisted, and the argument went on.

...The pale winter twilight crept up to the wide windows. Stepan boiled up the tea kettle for the third time, but the Party organizer and mine chief were still at it, now sitting opposite one another, bending over sheets of calculations until their rumpled mops of hair almost touched, now walking up and down the room and talking, talking incessantly.

Several times both Rogov and Bondarchuk turned impatiently to Stepan:

"Well, and what do you think? Why don't you say something?"

"What do I think?" Stepan shrugged his shoulders. "Plenty. But I'm not saying anything yet. Carry on."

At intervals Stepan wandered over to the electric stove to attend to the tea kettle, or fiddled with the radio, but his thoughts were elsewhere. All evening he listened avidly to every word Bondarchuk and Rogov uttered.

"Willingness and necessity are not enough to shift operations to the bottom level," Rogov was saying. "It all must be put on a solid foundation of technical computations. And all computations must proceed from concrete state plans which link us with the rest of the Kuzbas and the national economy as a whole. . . ."

"Like chains, eh?" the Party organizer put in with a twinkle.

"No, don't make a joke of it! Plans are the cornerstone of discipline in management. And let me tell you again, this is still not the main hitch. We can concentrate all preparatory operations on the bottom level and bare the seams there. But besides that, we would need two inner inclines right away. Yes, two! Where are we going to find the workers to do it? You know yourself that when I refused at the last meeting of the City Committee

Bureau to take the sixty workers that were offered, I did so purely from considerations of economy."

Bondarchuk twisted a button on Rogov's tunic.

"You're right. It will be difficult. But it has to be done. Take the matter up at once with the trust, the coal field administration, the ministry, and anybody else it may concern. . . ."

"It will hardly be possible to do that at once."

Bondarchuk's lips twisted.

"Why?"

Rogov spun around, took Stepan by the shoulders, and holding the young man in front of him asked Bondarchuk

"See this lad? He's our worker, and there are nearly three thousand more like him at Kapitalnaya. Don't you think we ought to ask their opinion? Shouldn't the miners take stock of forces themselves? That's what you yourself have been saying—remember that time we had to give up the banner?"

"Good!" Bondarchuk's face brightened. "Very good. We shall ask their advice. And you too, Stepan, remember that."

He picked up the telephone and called the number of the Party Bureau.

"Vera?" he spoke in a calm voice "Call up the members of the Bureau right away and tell them to come at eight. We will discuss the quarterly plan."

Rogov was about to leave with Bondarchuk when he broke out again:

"I had just begun to feel that the mine was like a factory with a single conveyor belt, like a smoothly-running mechanism. The devil take it! It isn't the work I'm afraid of. I can take plenty of that. It's the men I'm thinking of. This is going to be hard on them. Take the Chere-

panov boys—they've just learned to work on edge seams. It won't be easy for them to get used to flat seams, especially horizontal ones!"

And Danilov heard him exclaim again as they went downstairs:

"That's a sharp turn we'll be making, my friend, very sharp indeed!"

CHAPTER XXXI

Left to himself, Danilov spent some time on his customary evening duties. He tidied the room—he did not like the way the charwoman did it—read the papers and fiddled absently with the knob of the radio set as he had done during the argument between Bondarchuk and Rogov.

"So that's how it is . . . the chief has his doubts! Very well, comrade chief. . . ."

Danilov shook himself and stepped resolutely over to the telephone.

"It's urgent, you say?" Cherepanov said at the other end of the wire. "**All right, come along.** We were getting ready to go to a concert, but if you've really got something urgent, you'd better come over."

At the hostel he found Cherepanov, Sibirtsev, Annushka and Lukin waiting for him. Annushka was pacing up and down the room with her frost-reddened hands tucked inside the tiny pockets of her jacket. In one corner of the room sat Sasha Chernov sketching something in a notebook.

Cherepanov looked tired. During the past few days he had put in several hours on two other shifts besides his own. This was a busy and exciting time not only for

him but for all the other members of his crew. They were learning from one another, trying out various methods in preparation for another substantial step forward.

Before Stepan had time to exchange a word with his comrades a loud shout was heard outside.

"Whoa, there, whoa! Here we are! The music's come!"

They all rushed over to the window and what they saw made them gasp. Cherepanov clutched at his head in mock dismay.

"This is the limit!" he ejaculated.

At the entrance stood the huge supply department sledge with a tremendous rubber plant and a shining black piano. From behind the horse appeared the beaming visage of Mitenka. His new fur jacket was unbuttoned and his cap was pushed so far back on his head that it held on by a sheer miracle. His shaggy forelock was coated with hoar frost. Surveying the contents of the sledge with a proud smile, he slapped his leg with his gauntleted hands and dashed up the steps.

"Hey, everybody! Come on and help. Hurry up. I've brought the music!"

And while his comrades silently carried the giant rubber plant into the room and hauled the heavy piano after it he danced about shouting instructions as if unaware of their strained silence.

"Not there, not there! A little to the left! That's better. Now what do you want to pull at that branch for, you'll break it, you chump!"

The unloading operations over, they sat down beside the purchases to catch their breath. Lukin ran a finger over a sweating rubber plant leaf with the remark:

"Poor thing, there it was growing peacefully in some nice home. . . ."

"It wasn't a nice home at all," Mitenka interrupted. "Wasn't it?"

"No, I could tell by the woman who sold it to me. The way that woman haggled! Tried her best to get a couple of hundred rubles extra out of me for the piano."

"And how much did she get out of you altogether?"

Mitenka tossed his head. "Oh, I didn't give her a kopek over three thousand."

Sibirtsev coughed into his hand.

"Made quite a dent in your savings account, didn't it?"

The others only sighed. But Lukin couldn't refrain from the question:

"And what are we supposed to do now? Start dancing, eh? Tra-la-lal!"

"What do you mean tra-la-lal!" said Mitenka huffily. "You're batty. It's for Tonya Lipilina!"

"Yes, yes, it's for Tonya," Cherepanov hastened to explain. "We talked it over and decided to buy her something. Tomorrow we'll deliver the presents. Mitenka will shove the piano in his pocket, I'll tie the rubber plant up in a handkerchief, and Lukin can pick up a yard engine on the way. Ought to make quite an impression." He looked scornfully at the purchaser and his tone changed. "You silly fool! Don't you know how ill Tonya is? Have you forgotten what Stepan Georgievich told us? And here you come with a whole blinking orchestra and a telegraph pole besides."

With a whirl of her plaits Annushka turned on the culprit.

"Oh Mitenka," she said. "You're hopeless! You're always doing the craziest things. And all because of that

big heart of yours. Why, oh why, didn't you consult with someone before buying all this!"

"Besides, what sort of a present is that?" exclaimed Lukin. "More like club property if you ask me!"

Mitenka had been sitting stonily all through this, but suddenly he sat up straight, took his small trembling hands off the oilcloth table cover and eyed his comrades with a frightened look.

"I... I," he stammered. "I bought it for Tonya... She was at the front. She was fighting while I was still at school. My mum and my sisters... they're all alive and well... and maybe that's because Tonya was out there fighting... Why, I'd give my life for her!"

It was very quiet in the room, so quiet you could hear the clock tick loudly on the wall.

Annushka's cheeks had flushed a bright pink as she glanced at the crew leader questioningly as if imploring him to say something. But at that moment Danilov went over to Mitenka, took him by the shoulders, looked into his face and gave him a resounding kiss on the cheek.

It was decided that the piano and the plant would stand in the hostel for the time being; later on Tonya could suggest herself what to do with them. For the rest of the evening Mitenka was somehow in the centre of attention; Stepan, pouring out the tea, filled his cup first, and Sibirtsev offered him a smoke from a brand new packet of cigarettes. His comrades seemed to be seeing Mitenka in a new light that evening.

Before Danilov had explained the purpose of his unexpected visit, Cherepanov announced that most likely tomorrow they would be able to get things going properly on all three shifts. They'd have to pull together though

and keep up an even pace because this wouldn't be a one-day drive. And there would always be some doubters in the pit who would say they were overdoing it.

"There are some doubters already," Stepan interrupted.

The others looked incredulous. "Honestly there are," he repeated. "That's why I came."

That was a wonderful evening for the young people, an evening they were to remember long afterwards.

Stepan related in his own words the whole of the conversation between Bondarchuk and Rogov and the impression it had made on him. He told them about the coking coal, and the lower level, and about the sharp turn the mine was to take. That was the right thing to do, no doubt about it, as Rogov himself knew quite well. And to tell the truth he didn't exactly doubt the workers' ability to cope with it. He was just afraid that it would be a bit hard for them at first.

"So it will," Cherepanov confirmed.

"Well, what of it?" Sibirtsev demanded in surprise.

Annushka studied the pensive faces of her comrades. Chernov's pencil moved rapidly over his notebook. Outside the window in the distant twilight a shunting locomotive whistled fussily.

They had reached a new and unexplored section of the road they were traversing—that is how they accepted the news Danilov had brought. But the important thing was that they would be travelling that new road together.

"Well, what's the decision?" Cherepanov asked.

Danilov and Lukin both shrugged their shoulders in surprise at the very idea of such a question.

"Stepan Georgievich..." the crew leader involuntarily dropped his gaze, then looked Danilov squarely in

the eyes. "Stepan Georgievich, the seams at the lower level are flat, and that means we'll have to do the loading besides hewing. . . . We'll have to shovel the coal onto the conveyor."

"What of it?"

"It'll be hard work, Stepan Georgievich. . . ."

Danilov understood, and his eyes flashed.

"What are you suggesting? That I get myself a job in a barber's shop?"

Cherepanov reddened, but he regarded Danilov steadily.

"No, that isn't what I meant. I just wanted to let you know you could rely on the rest of us."

Danilov shook his head thoughtfully and smiled.

"I know that, Mikhail. But I am trying to rely on myself too." He turned to Annushka. "I chalked up one hundred and sixty-five per cent today, Annushka, but it wasn't the figures that pleased me so much as the fact that they came so much easier to me than the first hundred per cent. I don't know how I'll make out on the lower level I daresay I won't do so well at first, but I'll make a go of it! Yesterday Tonya told me frankly. . ." Stepan broke off, glanced quickly at his comrades, and then in a flat voice, asked: "You think I won't make it, is that it?"

Sibirtsev cleared his throat noisily.

"Look here." Annushka intervened. "If you ask me we're going about this the wrong way. We're acting like strangers, instead of being frank with one another. Let's decide right now: are we going over to the lower level or not?"

"Pavel Gordeyevich and Victor Petrovich will have to be told at once," was Sibirtsev's suggestion.

But Annushka demurred. "No, that won't do, we have no right to do anything before the change-over is started in the pit. When the management and the Party Bureau come to the miners for advice we'll be ready. Right? As for the present. . . ."

"We must get ready to begin!" Cherepanov summed up.

The decision taken, they all felt greatly relieved and began talking about things that had no apparent bearing on their work. Lukin as usual started complaining about the lack of educational work.

"What's the trouble, I'd like to know!" he said, spreading out his hands. "It's the same thing everywhere—no educational work whatever!"

But everyone was used to Lukin's complaints on this score and forgave him his little weakness. Lukin didn't want to be talked to, he wanted to be educated. There was something tremendously inspiring to him about the business of acquiring knowledge. He regarded teachers as supreme beings capable of lifting him out of himself, giving him wings, as it were, and revealing to him sources of inner strength of which he had been unaware. In Sanka's eyes all people belonged to one of two categories: those who taught and those who learned. But the young miner was extremely exacting of the teachers, the educators.

"Yes, that one knows how to teach," he would say of one. And of another: "Not so good. You can get what he's driving at, but it all sounds too much like yesterday's newspaper."

Today Lukin for some reason remembered a lecture he had heard the week before. In the first place the lecturer had been rotten. Why did the City Komsomol Committee

send such fellows down? He had spoken about love and friendship but anyone could see he'd never had a friend or a sweetheart in his life. He could hardly keep from yawning while he was talking, too.

Annushka nodded. Yes, she had already raised a fuss in the City Komsomol Committee about that lecture. She envied Chernov though; those articles he wrote to the paper were wonderful! She wished she could write like that. Chernov knew how to appeal to people. That was because the words came straight from his heart. When the Cherepanov boys scored their first victory he had actually written a poem. "The Young Kuzbas" he had called it. The editor wouldn't run it; he said literary magazines were the place for poems and not newspapers, so Chernov had written it out neatly and hung it over Cherepanov's cot. The crew were terribly proud of it and had learned it by heart.

Sibirtsev and Danilov, who were due to go on the morning shift, were conversing in low tones a little apart from the others.

"Think we could try it out tomorrow?" Stepan asked

Sibirtsev pondered the matter for a moment or two

"It depends on the timber. . . "

"We can let Dubintsev in on it, he's a live wire "

"The whole seam might be a bit too much to tackle . . ." Sibirtsev's bushy brows spread out as he smiled "It would be too bad if we caved in under the strain . . ."

Their eyes met, but before they had time to say anything the telephone rang.

At the same moment there was a commotion in the passage outside and Aleshkov burst into the room.

"He's botched it!" he gasped, gulped and added "Grigori Voshchin! Botched two faces!"

The telephone rang again. Stepan mechanically picked up the receiver and answered. Then in the expectant silence he said:

"Comrades, Tonya is worse."

A few seconds later they all made silently for the door and hurried down the stairs. The front door squeaked on its hinges and slammed violently.

CHAPTER XXXII

The sun rose up from behind Yelban mountain and the rosy-hued smoke rising from a hundred mining town chimneys seemed to bow to it in greeting.

Down the broad steps of the hospital came Annushka and Chernov, followed by Cherepanov and Sibirtsev. Danilov brought up the rear. The door slammed, awakening the echoes in the snow-clad hills at whose feet the babbling streams were never silent.

Only a minute before, Dr. Tkachenko had come down from the wards on the upper floor, surveyed the weary faces of the Komsomol members, wiped his glasses hastily and said:

"She's asleep. Yes, asleep. And now run along..."

Before he could say any more Sibirtsev had seized him in a bear's embrace and pressed his unshaven chin against the doctor's bald pate.

Tkachenko pushed him away angrily, grunted and went over to the window bright with the dawn.

"Off with you!" he said, waving them away. "I've had enough of you."

They stood outside on the snow-powdered steps and gazed at the town encircled by hills, translucent in the early morning light.

"It's going to be a fine day," Cherepanov observed.

At that moment the Kapitalnaya whistle sounded long and clear from behind the hill, summoning the workers to the first shift. Sibirtsev glanced at Stepan, who in turn looked at Annushka. She nodded.

"You may go, Stepan. I'll keep in touch and let you know as soon as she wakes up."

Cherepanov also took his leave. Chernov and Annushka stood for a long time on the steps after the others had gone.

This long, troubled night had matured the young people. They had thought over a great deal in those anxious hours of waiting for Tkachenko to bring them news of Tonya. And Tkachenko was none too generous with his news. Now and then he would look down over the banisters. "Still there?" he would inquire and disappear again.

Actually there was no need for him to say any more, for the very presence of this taciturn doctor was soothing; when he was there they knew that everything would be all right. Only once was Danilov called to the ward—and not by Tkachenko, but by Tonya's mother, Maria Tikhonovna. She came slowly down the stairs looking very strange in her white hospital smock, stood for a moment in the vestibule as though she had forgotten what she came for, then walked up to Stepan and with a tremor in her voice said:

"Go, Stepan, she's asking for you."

Danilov returned some ten minutes later and sat down next to Annushka. No one asked him any questions, but his comrades' eyes fairly shouted at him: "Well! How is she? Why don't you say anything?" And with his fists tightly clenched he spoke:

"She says there's a blinding light in front of her eyes

... it's like lightning and it hurts her. But the doctor says that this is the crisis, and soon we'll know. . . . Soon!" Stepan turned a pair of burning eyes on Annushka. "Here's what I've been thinking, Annushka," he said hoarsely. "I've killed the enemy in all sorts of ways—I've used the rifle, and even the field gun. . . . But if anyone ever comes here again, I'll demand a weapon that will sweep them away by the thousands. . . . Curse them!"

And Stepan raised his clenched fists to his eyes.

... And now the morning sun was rising over the town.

Watching Danilov, Sibirtsev and Cherepanov go, Chernov glanced at the shimmering orange curtain over the eastern ridge of the hills and sighed.

"I want to write a song!"

"A song?" Annushka glanced quickly at the journalist "Well, why don't you?"

"I'm going to. I've simply got to. It's fairly bursting out of me. I want to write about what I see here. . . ."

"And what do you see?"

"I see Tonya in the hospital ward, I see our town and I see you sitting all night weeping in a corner and Stepan and Georgi going off to the shift this morning. . . . Oh, if only I could do justice to a theme like that!"

"You try, Sasha," said Annushka and walked slowly down the steps.

She stood for a while and then hurried off: she had to go to Bondarchuk and Rogov at once and find out what had happened to young Voshchin. They had been too upset the night before to get the whole story.

"I've got some good news for you, Pavel Gordeyevich," said Cherkashin, the chief engineer of the trust, when he

met Rogov the following day "Your plan for next month has been approved; it will be the same as this month's, except for a two or three per cent increase in steam coal."

"Approved, you say?" replied Rogov unable to conceal his chagrin. "What's the hurry this time? We usually get the target figures in the beginning of the month."

Cherkashin smiled.

"Folks don't usually complain about punctuality"

"I don't mean that," Rogov objected. "It's the shortsightedness of local planning that surprises me. Tell me, why is it that with a pit like ours to fall back on, the plan goes on calling for more steam coal? After all, Kapitalnaya was originally intended to produce coking coal and as it functions now it ought to be playing first fiddle in that respect."

Cherkashin smiled again.

"Why be in such haste, Pavel Gordeyevich? All in good time. The national economy needs coking coal and that means that in due time it will take its proper place in Kapitalnaya output."

"No!" Rogov straightened his shoulders abruptly "I'm sorry, but with the tempo of life quickening everywhere all the time I can't agree to such 'evolutionary' theories

"In no more than half a year from now the trust and the mine field administration will suddenly realize that they are behind the times and then an unhealthy rush will begin," he went on, looking the other squarely in the eyes "They'll wake up to the fact that the lower level is not being developed properly—even the tunnelling of the principal workings which is the crux of the matter occupies a very insignificant place in the plan for capital work And that is why we adopted a special decision

yesterday at a meeting of the Party Bureau to ask the City Committee and the trust to revise Kapitalnaya's production plans. And in the meantime we shall gradually muster our forces to tackle the bottom level."

"Then you don't doubt the plans will be revised?"

"No doubt whatever."

Rogov was about to go when Cherkashin stopped him

"I sent you a new engineer today," he said. "Galina Voshchina. She's well thought-of around here. See what you can find for her to do."

For some reason this piece of news spoiled Rogov's humour. He had met Galya only once since that party at the Voshchins', at Tonya Lipilina's house. They had talked like old friends, and again he had felt wonderfully at ease in the society of this girl with the soft, faintly mocking eyes. As they had left the house together he had made an effort to break the spell by talking about the pit, about the miners, and about the new job to which he and Bondarchuk were harnessing all the leading personnel in the mine.

"You and our Party organizer are old friends, aren't you?" he ventured.

"Yes, I know Victor Petrovich quite well," Galya replied after a pause. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I envy you. I am sorry I made his acquaintance so recently. A remarkable man! In the short time he has been with us he has made himself quite indispensable at the mine. Do you know what I mean? He doesn't rush about shouting and demanding, he never nags, and yet wherever you look, you're bound to see evidence of the Party organizer's work."

"Yes," said Galya thoughtfully, "Victor Petrovich is a very fine person."

There was nothing unusual about that conversation yet for some reason Rogov found himself returning to it again and again, remembering the girl's pleasant open smile that seemed to say: "Isn't life wonderful?"

"Well, what of it?" Rogov asked himself. "I don't see what all this has to do with me?"

It was Valya's image he carried in his heart, an image that was with him always, in grief and in joy. Out there at the front when he had recited Simonov's poem, "Wait for Me" to the men, it was really Valya he was speaking to, Valya he was thinking of, Valya and far-off Siberia.

Yet now his letters to her had been growing more and more curt, and more and more often he asked her: "Soon?"

"I know, dear, I know," she had written in one of her recent letters. "I am a little tired of all this delay too. Yet it seems to me that neither of us is to blame. I confess that I am a little jealous not so much of the pit as of those people who see you every day and who love you. Because how could anyone help loving Rogov?"

And now after these chance meetings with Galya, he felt that in some way he had wronged Valya.

Returning to the pit, Rogov spent nearly an hour studying the personnel lists to see whether anyone could be spared for driving the incline. Presently Grigori Voshchin came in. His eyelids were swollen from lack of sleep, but his dark eyes had a fixed, concentrated look as if he had something important on his mind that he was afraid to forget.

As soon as he had heard that Grigori had failed, and that the young miner had left the pit without even stop-

ping to wash and change, Rogov had hurried over to the Voshchin home. Ekaterina Tikhonovna opened the door; she seemed startled to see him. To his whispered inquiry as to whether the men were at home, she had silently pointed to the door of the living room and her eyes told him plainly how anxious she was about her son.

As he was taking off his coat he heard the booming voice of the old miner from behind the partition.

"That's how a miner gets experience. You'll do better next time. And there's nothing to be in the dumps about. Sit down and let's do some figuring together, and see what's what."

"They don't really need me," Rogov reflected with relief as he crossed the threshold into the living room.

He did not spend much time at the Voshchins'. He only asked for a brief account of what had happened and how it had come about that Grigori had neglected the roof in two drifts at once.

Grigori explained that when he had worked up to a good pace he had decided to take a chance and improve on his own time estimate by going ahead without stopping to timber.

"Decided to take a chance?" Rogov repeated.

Grigori compressed his lips tightly, then he looked up at the engineer and in a voice hoarse with pent-up emotion he said: "I cannot understand what got into me, Pavel Gordeyevich. After all, we calculated everything properly, the schedule was worked out to the minute, there was nothing wrong with the faces—everything was fine. What made me do it? After all those years I've worked with father, too. What was lacking?"

"Wisdom!" Rogov got up, slowly walked around the

table and paused in front of the young miner. "Your father's wisdom. You and I ventured out on this new road equipped with engineering calculations, a certain amount of skill and a tremendous desire to achieve our purpose. But what we lacked was the cool, levelheaded wisdom that comes of long experience. I, too, am partly to blame, of course, but not so much as you. I realize that you were prompted by a desire, not altogether conscious perhaps, to prove to your father that his training had not been wasted. That is why you did not want to share your new method with him. That, Grisha, is not worthy of you either as a son or as a Party member!"

"Yes, I realized that today," Grigori replied after a reflective pause. He looked up again at Rogov and his eyes now expressed relief.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Grigori opened his notebook. "Here's the new schedule, Pavel Gordeyevich, although the old one wasn't bad either. But this time I've worked out a slightly different principle. . . . With father's help."

Rogov listened to the miner and nodded with satisfaction. Yes, it was hard to add anything to the new timetable. Everything looked much simpler and more efficient. The multiface method was to be carried out not by one miner with his helper and a few auxiliary workers, none of whom answered for anything in particular, but by a well-coordinated crew of miners, each member of which knew his place, the work he had to do and the time allotted for it. The result was something like a conveyor consisting of a number of consecutive operations. On only one point did Rogov disagree with Grigori. Too much time was still taken up by shovel-work, and that slowed up the whole system.

"Cross it out," Rogov said briefly. "I've changed my mind. We'll put in a transporter belt. That will do the trick, Grisha."

Grigori leaned back in his chair. "You've certainly got me into this up to my ears, Pavel Gordeyevich," he said.

Rogov laughed.

"It's your own fault, my lad. So don't go blaming me for it. Now go and talk to your crew. But I warn you," he narrowed his eyes slyly. "I warn you, Grisha, don't you dare come home any more from the mine without washing up first."

"I know I behaved like a fool yesterday," Grigori confessed as he shook hands with the engineer. "Poor mother was quite upset."

CHAPTER XXXIII

"The underground working rises fifty metres at an angle of sixty degrees. The back is supported by heavy props. The breast of the wall of coal is cut in zigzag pattern into symmetrical steps resembling an inverted giant staircase with three-metre stairs. This is the seam—the forward line of the miner's arduous offensive. Here is the source of the stream of coal that flows through the subterranean channels of the drifts and crosscuts and up the main shaft to the surface, there to be seized by conveyor belts, emptied into bunkers, loaded in railway cars and sent rolling over the rails by night and by day to its destination thousands of kilometres away—to factories and power stations where it is converted into steam, light and heat. Thanks to the efforts of that torchbearer, the coal miner, the seam is the source of both warmth and light."

"Get that, torchbearer? That's Sasha Chernov's idea of you," Danilov said to Sibirtsev with a smile, as he rolled up the local newspaper.

It all began that morning after the anxious night spent at the hospital. The crews had been given their assignments for the shift by Dubintsev himself and not his assistant as the young miners had feared. They told him briefly that they proposed bringing up a trainload of coal from the long seam that shift. The technician had pulled himself up sharply and glanced around with a conspiratorial air.

"Sh-sh! Not so loud. . . ."

It turned out that he had been thinking of the very thing for some time, and had actually drawn up a timetable for the work, prepared the necessary tools and had a preliminary talk with the new transport chief whose response had been promising enough. In other words, everything was in readiness for the lucky day.

"Luck's got nothing to do with it," Danilov replied curtly. "Don't imagine we thought this up just like that--on the spur of the moment."

"We're just itching to take a shot at it," Sibirtsev added and glanced at Stepan.

And again they remembered the brief evening conference, the long night spent at the hospital, and again a tremendous impatience seized the two of them. Interrupting each other, they told Dubintsev the whole story.

Nikolai gripped Sibirtsev firmly by the shoulders.

"Good! Go to it!" he breathed.

He was not exaggerating when later in the day he phoned to Rogov that it looked as if the world was coming to an end in his seam. All through the eight hours of the shift an incessant roar and rumble filled the working,

and the coal came down to the chutes in an avalanche. And on top of it all, something went wrong at the power station and the power was shut off. When the electrical cars came to a halt on the tracks the auxiliary brigades took over—the men rushed to the neighbouring sections, got all the empties they could find and hauled them down the long corridor by hand.

Danilov found the going hard during the first two hours, but after that he got into the swing and new strength seemed to flow into him. He and Sibirtsev hardly exchanged a word, the work swept them along as if on the wings of a song—and it seemed to him that hundreds of miners were hearkening to that song.

About noon they struck a snag. Eight of the steps in the middle of the seam had just been blasted and the miners had pushed further up, when Sibirtsev suddenly drew back.

"What's the matter? You're holding us up," Stepan grumbled.

The other shook his head in silence, moved to one side of the face and called out hoarsely:

"Look out! A boulder!"

Stepan too recoiled in spite of himself. This was a nasty surprise indeed, the seam had been as clear as crystal till now.

Boulders found in coal beds sometimes weighed as much as several hundred kilograms. True, these were very rare, but the miners hated them like poison. If a mass of rock like that came crashing down it could wreck the timbering and clog up the chute so badly that a whole shift might have to be spent repairing the damage.

"Well?" Stepan turned to his comrade impatiently. "What're we going to do now? Go down on our knees and pray?"

Seeing that Sibirtsev was still undecided, Stepan pushed up to the danger spot, turned his lamp on it and involuntarily stepped back.

"Hell! Wouldn't care to see a thing like that even in my dreams!"

The boulder exposed by the explosion protruded from the face, only one third of its egg-shaped mass being imbedded in the seam. From the distance it looked to Stepan like a bulging dull-grey monster eye staring out stupidly from the wall of coal.

Sibirtsev came up to him.

"A beauty, isn't it?" Stepan said

"Lovely," Georgi spat. "I can imagine the bump it could raise on your bean."

"Never mind the bumps now. We'd better try and figure out how to get rid of the blooming thing."

"There's nothing to figure out. Got to blast it. That's a shift gone!"

"What do you mean, gone?"

"It'll take time to drill a hole into it."

"Come on! Let's tackle it," Stepan threw off his canvas jacket.

All through the shift they had worked like the devil, as Dubintsev had put it, but it was nothing as compared to the next twenty minutes. Below the danger spot they laid a floor of slabs slanting toward the goaf so that the rock after blasting should be carried out of the way, and drilled only one small hole. The shot-firer went about his business on tiptoe shaking his head dubiously.

"Never mind, old man," Stepan reassured him. "According to the laws of physics the gases will expand in all directions."

"That's just the trouble," the other complained. "It would be better if they only expanded in the direction of the stone."

Secretly Danilov himself was not too certain that the shot would be a success, but there was nothing else to be done—you just couldn't sit back and wait, especially with the auxiliary workers below getting restless.

"Hey, you record-breakers, where's the coal?" they were shouting already.

Everything would be all right if the boulder was lodged firmly enough—in that case the blast would break it up. But what if the monster was waiting for the slightest jolt to come crashing down?

The thought brought a frown to Stepan's face. The rock would hurtle down with the force of a cannon ball, raking the full length of the working to the very bottom.

The men descended to the lower crosscut and stopped there in spite of themselves to hearken to the silence.

"Well, what's the word?" the shot-firer hesitantly inserted the plunger key in the blasting machine.

Sibirtsev looked questioningly at Danilov. He too was about to say something, but Stepan planted his back more firmly against a timber, stuck his lamp between his knees and rapped out:

"Go ahead, comrade, or I'll do it myself."

With a jerk of his shoulder, the shot-firer turned the key.

Holding their breath, the men strained their ears to catch the crashing of the boulder through the reverberations of the explosion. But there were no such sounds, and at last everything was quiet again.

"All clear," announced the shot-firer.

Work was resumed and the coal rumbled on its way

again. Danilov seized prop after prop and in a flash had them wedged in to support the strata of rock overhanging the hollowed-out working—so tight were they in place that a blow from an axe made them ring like a bass string. In the meantime Sibirtsev's drill chattered madly like a machine gun in the hands of a veteran soldier.

Dubintsev looked in frequently. He was exhausted; not so much from the miners' pace as from straightening out hitches in hauling the coal from the working. At last he had to let out the secret. He picked up the mine telephone to call the chief.

Rogov had barely seen Voshchin to the door when the selector loud-speaker crackled and Dubintsev's voice came through in a hoarse whisper:

"Pavel Gordeyevich, I'm going under!" he said with a short laugh. "Sibirtsev and Danilov are doing me in!"

"What?" said Rogov in mock surprise. "What are they doing to my best section chief? I'll phone the militia right away. . ."

"Never mind the militia, Pavel Gordeyevich, just get me transport!" Dubintsev shouted. "All the transport you can possibly lay your hands on. I'm down on my bended knees—it's hell let loose down here! The long seam's full of thunder and lightning, and all the chutes are full of coal; there are ten men busy on the loading and two crews have their hands full hauling in the timber. It's still three hours short of the end of the shift—think of it, a full three hours!—and they've already brought in four hundred and eighty tons! They're mining combines, not men!"

Rogov jumped up so violently that his chair was flung back.

"What are you talking about? What combines? Who?"

"Danilov and Sibirtsev, of course!"

"Danilov and Sibirtsev?" Rogov was breathless with excitement. Mechanically his hands went through the papers on his desk, then he laughed gaily. "I've got to go down into the pit. Right away. Great lads!"

"I'm going below," he called out to Paulina Ivanovna as he dashed through the outer office.

A low voice made him look around. Galya! It seemed to him that he had been expecting her, that he had been rushing to meet her. He gave her a strong handclasp and ushered her into his office.

She took a seat facing the sun-flooded window, looked up quickly at Rogov's smiling face, and, for the first time since they came to know each other, she blushed.

"I . . . I came to see you . . . Pavel Gordeyevich," she stammered. "I was sent here from the trust. . . ." Her eyes asked: "Perhaps I have come at the wrong time?"

After a momentary pause, Rogov bent slightly toward her and touched her arm.

"I have been waiting for you, Galina Afanasyevna," he said. "I think you ought to tackle the incline."

Galya was nervous; this was evident from the trembling of her eyelashes, and from the way she raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sun one minute, and stared straight into the dazzling light the next.

Rogov walked over to the window and drew the curtain.

"What do you say about the incline, Galina Afanasyevna?"

"Is it . . . important, Pavel Gordeyevich?"

"Important?" Rogov now advanced to the middle of the floor. "That incline will add thirty per cent to the pit's capacity, and besides we'll be tapping coking coal. You

understand? Coking coal is our immediate future—that's what is in question!"

"Do you think I will cope with the job?" Galya looked at him more calmly now, and her eyes were soft and shining and faintly mocking again. "Are you sure I won't fail?"

Rogov turned away as if to think it over; actually, however, it was because he felt uneasy under the gaze of those green eyes with an unspoken question hovering in their depths.

"That is for you to say," he replied in a voice that was almost formal in spite of himself. "The total estimate for the work is four hundred thousand rubles, and we have at our disposal a hundred and fifty. We haven't the workers yet, but we'll find them in the other sections of the mine. The technical aspect of the job you will learn from the chief engineer. That is all, Galina Afanas'yevna."

She ran her fingers lightly over the edge of the smoothly polished desk, then lifted her hand slightly and brought it palm down on the desk top.

"Good. I'll take it. Only I must warn you: I like to get things done."

Rogov brightened up at once. "Then you're just the person we need! Now, perhaps you will look around and get to know the people. . . . I'm in a bit of a rush at the moment—got to go down the mine."

Twenty minutes later he was at Dubintsev's section. He sat down some distance away from the hewers. Stepan could not resist boasting:

"Recognize the guardsmen in action, Captain?"

"I do, Sergeant. And I am proud of you, man! By the way, I just phoned the hospital. . . ."

The rest was drowned out in a long burst from Sibir-tsev's hammer drill.

... "Bring him over, they told me. She is dying to see him. . . ."

Stepan caught his breath and in a sudden upsurge of emotion, he bore down on his drill with all his might.

"There'll be a meeting after the shift," Rogov announced during the next brief break in the din. "We are going to sign the letter to Stalin."

He stayed for a short while longer, inspected the timbering and then went down into the drift. There he met Dubintsev. Flashing his lamp at the mine chief's face, the technician was taken aback by the expression he found there.

"Nothing wrong, is there, Pavel Gordeyevich? They've already topped the six-hundred-ton mark!"

"Everything's all right in the seam," Rogov replied. "But how are you coming along?"

"Me? I'm tied up into knots, but I've made sure there are enough props and empties, and two relays of shot-firers. I'm all fagged out though. . . ."

"Fagged out!" Rogov snorted unsympathetically. "A commander has no right to get fagged out. That's an extraordinary shift you've got there. We must teach hundreds of others to work just as efficiently. But to teach others you have to have a clear idea of what is happening here. I want you to report on this to the miners tomorrow. Now what are you going to tell them? That you were all fagged out? And mind you, I'll see to it that you make that report!"

"Is that all?" Dubintsev regained his composure and flashed his notebook in front of the engineer. "I've got a minute-by-minute account of everything here, down to the last operation! I'm ready for the report!"

"Then you knew what was wanted all along?"

"Of course I did!"

At that moment Danilov up in the seam disconnected his hammer drill and turned to face Sibirtsev standing beside him. Their eyes met as they listened to the silence that had suddenly broken into the working, and they smiled as if they had just climbed to the top of a steep mountain and caught sight of a vast green expanse basking in the warm sun beyond the snow-capped summit.

"Well," Stepan said as he looked at his hands and heaved a sigh of relief, "now we've earned the right to sign the letter to Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin"

CHAPTER XXXIV

The first of April. According to the calendar it is already spring, but the warm weather is still far away on the other side of snow-capped Alatau, and in the morning a frosty mist hovers in the deep gullies of the Kondoma watershed and a crimson sun rises in a sparkling aureole—a sure sign, folks say, that snow storms are in the offing. Yet spring noiselessly spreads her blue wings over the Kuznetsk land and steals up at last to the very heart of Siberia.

Even in the mine—if you hit a fresh stream of air from a fan around midday—you can catch a whiff of melting snow and the scent of moss warmed by the noonday sun. Spring!

"Why, of course, it's Spring!" Rogov threw open both of the small ventilation openings in the wide window, inhaled the fresh cold air that burst into the office and turned to Khomyakov with a merry twinkle in his dark-grey eyes.

"What did you say, Pavel Gordeyevich?" asked the mine surveyor, tearing his eyes from his papers for a moment.

"Spring, that's what I said!" Rogov repeated. "Spring, Gerasim Petrovich, is knocking at our door, at the door of the pit and the door of our hearts!"

"Our hearts?" Khomyakov echoed and peered short-sightedly into the chief's face. "You can let spring into your heart if you like, Pavel Gordeyevich, but when it comes to the pit you'd better be careful."

"Yes, yes!" Rogov shook himself and went back to his desk. "You're quite right. As far as the pit is concerned Spring is something to worry about. And although everything is ready to handle the excess water, I can't help feeling anxious."

They had lingered longer than usual at their desks. The day shift was almost due and still they stayed on, talking. Rogov and the mine surveyor had taken to meeting regularly and it was hard to say which of them looked forward more eagerly to these occasions when, seated opposite each other in the mine chief's office, they would argue about some detail of Khomyakov's coal combine, or lay aside their blueprints to daydream about things that appeared to border on the miraculous but were nevertheless quite realistic. At such times the sober computation of the mine surveyor would alternate with flights of Rogov's fantasy. The two men saw the miners, armed with the ingenious new machine, attacking the coal bed as it had never been attacked before.

Apart from the cutter bar which was being made at the Kiselev machinery works, Khomyakov's combine was ready for the initial tests at the face. A special working had been prepared for it—a thirty-metre face at one of the

operating sections. The base of the machine with the transporter belt and pneumatic system had long been assembled at the machine shop where crowds of curious onlookers gathered to inspect it

"Everything's ready, Pavel Gordeyevich," Khomyakov said as he neatly tied the tapes of the folder in which he kept his blueprints. Then he sighed. "Everything except my heart. It has that tense feeling you get before taking a leap!"

Rogov banged the table impatiently with his fist.

"Damn it all! Why are those Kiselev people taking such a long time over that cutter bar? Listen, Gerasim Petrovich, you must take one more trip over there and stay there until that director comes across with that bar. And while you're at it tell him from me he ought to be ashamed to call himself an engineer. Tell him that's no way to work!"

Khomyakov smiled.

"So I pack my little combine bag again today, eh?"

"What combine bag?"

"The one I've been carrying around with me these three months. Maria Dmitrievna calls it my combine bag. 'I wish you'd hurry up and finish with that machine of yours,' she says, 'because you're looking younger every day, fairly bubbling over, I'm afraid to let you out of my sight. . . .'"

"Bubbling over!" Rogov paced the room twitching his shoulders as if his tunic had suddenly grown too tight for him. "Bubbling over!" he repeated. "Maria Dmitrievna is right. We have the secret of eternal youth. We never grow old, never get tired! But we must make haste. . . ."

Khomyakov looked up at Rogov uncomprehendingly, then rose to his feet at once.

"I must be going, Pavel Gordeyevich. I arranged to meet the chief engineer at four."

"How is he, by the way?" Rogov inquired with interest. "What is his reaction to this business?"

"Do you know," the surveyor began, his cheeks flushing with pleasure, "I believe he's caught a bit of the same fever. At three o'clock this morning. . . ." Khomyakov lowered his voice to a whisper as if he feared that someone might overhear. "Can you imagine, at three o'clock this morning he rang my bell. 'Oh,' he says, 'you're in bed already?' Maria Dmitrievna was quite annoyed. 'Already?' she says, 'why, good folks have been in their beds long since.' But Fyodor Lukich wasn't a bit put out; he looked as if he'd been drinking 'Sorry,' he said, 'but I simply had to come and tell Gerasim Petrovich about an idea that struck me while I was examining his pneumatic system. A wonderful idea!' And would you believe it, he offered me an automatic device, which regulates the speed in accordance with the depth of the cut."

Left alone, Rogov sat motionless for a few minutes feeling the warm April sun on the back of his neck. Yes, everything was fine, nearly everything! They were gradually getting ready to work the bottom level. The problem now was the main shaft, a knotty problem that, but it would have to wait for a while. He must remember to look in there later on and see how Galya was getting along.

Rogov's brow contracted with displeasure. Again! How many times had he forbidden himself to use the girl's first name? Why that stupid familiarity! Very well, Galina Afanasyevna then, but the fact remained that he would have to go and see how things were moving down there. After all, there were the time limits to be considered!

He exulted in the thought that there were three mechanized sections already in operation—a fact of which the pit was extremely proud. Three sections had been fully mechanized, from face to bunkers. Abakumov combines were operating at two long faces, and the third, Nekrasov's, was working by the automatic loading method. Now to get Khomyakov's machine completed as quickly as possible and put into operation, not in one seam but wherever possible!

Rogov started and glanced around him under the impression that he had been thinking aloud.

At that moment Sevastyanov looked in. "The men are ready, Pavel Gordeyevich. We can begin."

Rogov waited for the hubbub in the hall to subside, then walked over to the back wall of the stage and slowly moved aside the blue curtain.

"There she is, the beauty!" exclaimed one of the miners.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes were trained on the schematic chart of the underground workings of Kapitalnaya pit. Three zigzagging red lines, cutting across the working fields and intersecting at the main shaft, stood out in bold relief. Some ten blue lines traced a winding course along the drifts and gangways leading to the hoist.

Rogov stepped over to the ramp and pointed with an abrupt gesture to the plan.

"The red lines, comrades, stand for. . . ."

"Mechanized mining!" someone finished for him.

"Yes, these lines stand for mechanized mining and conveying. Thanks to our skill and persistence this first

step has been made. Now, the blue lines indicate those sections where machinery has to be introduced tomorrow, the day after, a month from now, for mechanization must advance steadily and unceasingly, stopping at no obstacle.

"Today we have three completely mechanized sections in operation. Here machines handle the coal from face to bunkers. We could get at least another ten going right away if we had the combines. I may report that a Makarov unit is already on its way here, which means that we can proceed to organize one more mechanized section at once. Now the question is where. . . ."

Some irresistible force seemed to sweep the miners closer to the platform.

"I have already talked the matter over with some of the comrades. . . ." Rogov went on.

A mighty shout drowned his voice.

"Our section!"

"Ours!"

"Pavel Gordeyevich, the twentieth!"

"The twelfth!" several voices sang out.

Rogov heard them above the general uproar and turned toward them.

"The twelfth?"

"Yes, yes!" chorussed the Cherepanov boys.

"Well, I'll have to think about it. . . ." Rogov could not help smiling as he overheard someone close by say with a sigh: "Those Komsomol lads have all the luck!"

"Luck nothing!" was Mitenka's swift comeback, "it's hard work that does it!"

Rogov raised his hand.

"I believe that Dubintsev's section has really earned the right of priority. His miners hold four banners, every

one of them is overfulfilling his quota, and what's more it gives me great pleasure to report that the cheapest coal mined in the whole pit comes from Dubintsev's section."

"They're doing a fine job and no mistake," declared Afanasi Petrovich. "They deserve to have priority."

Annushka, standing on tiptoe trying to catch a glimpse of the old drift miner when the meeting was over, jumped as someone behind her said: "Good afternoon, Anna Maximovna!"

She turned round and uttered a little cry of surprise and delight: "Kolya!" Whereupon she blushed with shame at not recognizing her own husband's voice and with joy at seeing him again after eight long hours.

"Good afternoon, Nikolai Victorovich!" she said primly, her lips twitching with suppressed laughter. She was about to offer him her hand, but instead drew him impulsively toward her and whispered: "My, but you are dirty! I can only tell it's you by the way your eyes shine. Hungry? Come and I'll get you something to eat. . . . In the canteen! But you don't mind, do you, darling?"

"Mind? I'm as happy as the devil!"

And all the way to the canteen he kept repeating: "Happy as the devil!" until Annushka protested.

"Stop it, I don't believe in happy devils!"

They sat down side by side at the table and while Nikolai ate, Annushka followed nearly every spoonful of cabbage soup, every bit of meat with the solicitous inquiry: "Does it taste good?"

Nikolai smiled. "You can't imagine how good cabbage soup tastes after a shift "

CHAPTER XXXV

After repeated invitations the Dubintsevs finally paid a visit to the Starodubtsevs. It would have been hardly polite to refuse them again. Moreover, Klavdia Stepanovna, Starodubtsev's wife, had on more than one occasion reproached the young couple for "never going anywhere."

As a matter of fact, Annushka was secretly glad of the opportunity to go visiting. It was so pleasant to hear Nikolai call her "my wife" in front of strangers. Old-fashioned? Perhaps, but she couldn't help it.

She took care to give Nikolai detailed instructions on how to behave in company. In the first place he must try and keep his great big paws off the table; secondly, he must remember not to cross his legs so that the tip of his boot waved carelessly right under the chin of the person sitting opposite; and for one evening at least he must try not to yawn the way he always did when bored. No matter how dull it might be, you must not show it, out of respect for your hosts.

How much Nikolai benefited from this lesson in good manners is hard to say, but the prospect struck him as so bleak that he started yawning on the quiet long before they left the house. Annushka noticed it and sighed.

The Starodubtsevs gave their neighbours a cordial welcome. Semyon Konstantinovich seemed actually a trifle flustered as he ushered them into the dining room.

"Well," he remarked seating himself on the couch beside Nikolai, "it's high time you paid us a visit. It's a disgrace—living across the landing from each other and we never seem to get together."

"That's true," assented Nikolai. "You'd think there was a Chinese wall or something between us. But you

know how it is, work takes up so much time there's not much left for visiting. You know yourself, Kapitalnaya doesn't like you to give her only half of your attention."

"Kapitalnaya?" Starodubtsev smiled understandingly. "Might as well be frank about it, neighbour. You mean Pavel Rogov. That man really doesn't know any limits. He ought to be in charge of the city militia. . . ."

Dubintsev shook his head and a tender look came into his eyes

"Yes, but he certainly knows how to run things. Sometimes he does come down rather hard, but it's a pleasure to work with him just the same. You feel stronger somehow with him beside you. And look what he's doing to that pit! At the last regional committee plenary meeting Kapitalnaya was recognized as one of the best mines in the region!"

"And why shouldn't it be!" Semyon Konstantinovich shrugged his shoulders and stuck out his lower lip. "Why shouldn't it be? Kapitalnaya has tremendous productive resources. . . ."

Dubintsev's cheeks grew pink, he was about to argue the point, but Klavdia Stepanovna protested.

"That's enough, Semyon," she said to her husband. "I told you I won't have production conferences in my house." She turned to Annushka. "Really, anyone would think that the whole world was one great big mine. It's sickening."

They had a little to drink before supper. Starodubtsev told them about his work and his recent trip to Novosibirsk.

After that tiff with Rogov, he told the young couple, he had found a very nice position in the trust as assistant chief engineer in charge of capital construction.

"It isn't lucrative, but it's nice and quiet. No hanging about the pit days and nights. And what's most important," he added with a wave of his hand, "no responsibility, or hardly any. And then the whole atmosphere of the place is on such a high plane."

Klavdia Stepanovna herself was obliged to admit that her husband had begun to look much more refined lately. And it was all due to the environment.

"Take that last trip to Novosibirsk," Starodubtsev went on. "I met all sorts of people of education and culture there. Professor Skitsky, for instance, whom I consulted about new mine construction. There's a brainy chap for you! And he has an assistant, a young woman, who is just suited to him. Young, intelligent and very good-looking. A marvellous combination, isn't it?"

Catching his wife's disapproving look, Starodubtsev smiled condescendingly, lowered his eyes and repeated:

"A peach of a girl I tell you! What is her name now? Ah yes! Valentina Sergeyevna Yevtyukhova."

"Valya Yevtyukhova?" Annushka's face lit up. "Why, that's Pavel Gordeyevich's fiancée! Didn't you know?"

"Wha-at!" Starodubtsev actually gasped. "Valentina Sergeyevna Rogov's fiancée? Impossible!"

"But she is, she is!" Annushka clutched Nikolai's arm in her excitement. "Everyone knows it at the mine. Oh, I'm so glad to hear that she is . . . worthy of Pavel Gordeyevich."

"Worthy!" Starodubtsev glanced quickly at his wife, then his eyes glinted slyly and he burst out laughing. "Fiancée! That's a good one! Well, Pavel is in for a big surprise! Ha, ha! What a lark!"

Nikolai looked sternly from Annushka to the Starodubtsevs. His hostess, anticipating some juicy bit of

gossip, lifted her eyebrows and made a languid attempt to check her husband:

"Now, Semyon, you're always making up stories. . . ."

"Making it up?" Starodubtsev suppressed another fit of laughter. "Oh no, this time I'm not making anything up." Surveying his audience with an air of something like triumph he said: "You might as well know that the clever and beautiful Valya, ex-fiancée of Pavel Rogov is going to marry Professor Skitsky!"

"Oh no!" Annushka burst out in distress. With her cold palms pressed to her cheeks she looked in horror at Nikolai, who sat with his head lowered avoiding his hosts' eyes.

But Starodubtsev appeared to be unaware of the effect of his announcement. He leaned back in his chair, twirled his fork and went blithely on:

"Oh yes, my friends, she's going to marry Professor Skitsky. She's only been leading Rogov by the nose. And if you ask me she's doing the right thing. She and the professor will make a damn fine couple!"

But how had he happened to find out about all this? Just a minute, now, let him think. Ah yes, he remembered. He had been consulting the professor about the coal reserves at Kapitalnaya with a view to expanding the mine. Skitsky had listened to him very carefully, making a few notes in his pad. But several times he had interrupted the conversation to call in his secretary.

"Has Valentina Sergeevna come back?" he asked her "How is her health?"

And once during the interview he had excused himself to Starodubtsev and put through a call to someone named Vakshin whom he had given strict instructions not to give the proofs of the book to Valentina Sergeevna Yevtyu-

khova. He would do the work himself, he said. And in general it was high time that graduate student Yevtyukhova was relieved of such secondary work. Didn't the Geology Department know that Valentina Sergeyevna had been unwell for some time now?

The professor went out of the room for a few minutes and through the half-open door Starodubtsev had overheard a conversation in the outer room:

"Ever since Valentina Sergeyevna got sick the professor has been quite jumpy," he heard Skitsky's secretary complain.

"Do you think there's anything serious between those two?" another voice inquired.

"Serious?" the secretary sounded surprised. "You're very naive, Irina, if you think that a man like Vasili Pan-teleyevich would waste his time running after a woman if his intentions were not serious! Perhaps you think this trip they are making together to Moscow is purely business? Oh no, my dear, it is all very clear. And what about that new flat on Serebryanikovskiy Street the professor has been fussing with for two months now? It's all decided, you can take my word for it. You can't fool me."

The following day Starodubtsev had had the good fortune to meet Valentina Sergeyevna herself. Now he understood something about their interview that had puzzled him at the time.

"You're from Berezovsk?" she had asked him, and had gone on to express surprise at the fact that the colliery management there, including that of Kuzbasugol, were not paying enough attention to the industrial development of the Shushtalepsky deposits beyond the Kondoma. There was a concentration of 24 seams there, most of which could be tapped at comparatively low cost.

"I can't believe you have no clear-thinking, farsighted people at Berezovsk!" she said. "Berezovsk. . ." she repeated and suddenly she had startled and looked fixedly at Starodubtsev. "Wait a minute," she said, "so you are from Berezovsk. . ." and she had turned away quickly and walked over to the window.

"I am. Why do you ask?"

"It doesn't matter." She went back to the desk, but before sitting down he heard her say: "How stupid of me, how perfectly idiotic not to have thought of it. . ."

"Now I see what that was all about," Semyon Konstantinovich thrust his hands into his pockets and stretched his legs under the table. "I understand what the trouble was. The girl was simply having pangs of conscience. But that's all right, she'll soon get over it!"

Throughout this stupid, smug recital the Dubintsevs sat downcast and miserable. And if Nikolai had enough self-control to preserve at least outward calm, Annushka was positively panting with grief and disgust. "Poor Pavel Gordeyevich," she kept whispering "Poor, poor Pavel Gordeyevich."

Klavdia Stepanovna, seemingly unaware of her visitors' discomfiture, began to complain about the dullness of life and shopping difficulties.

Starodubtsev echoed his wife's sigh.

"Yes, life is pretty dull in a mining town."

Annushka was outraged. How could they say such things? She jumped up and without waiting to hear Nikolai make their excuses she all but ran out of the Starodubtsev apartment. Her cheeks were flaming as if someone had struck her and she searched in vain for some scathing, annihilating word that would obliterate the insult from her memory.

When Nikolai came in she was sitting on the bed with her face buried in the pillow. He touched her shoulder.

"Now, then, Annushka, don't be a little silly."

She sat up with a brusque movement. Her eyes were wet.

"How can you be so calm about it?" she cried. "Suppose Rogov heard anyone say such beastly things about you, about us two? I never realized before what horrible creatures gossips can be! Oh how I hate myself for not having the courage to tell them so to their faces. Rogov would have, I'm certain of it!"

"Please, Annushka, darling," Nikolai sat down beside her. "I know Rogov would have swept right through that whole outfit without blinking. As for Valentina Sergeyevna . . . well, we'll have to wait and see. After all, it is their private affair."

Annushka's eyes flashed and for a moment she looked at him with cold hostility.

"Don't you dare say such a thing!" she said in a low voice. "You hear? These are our people. Their grief, their mistakes are ours . . ." Then relapsing into her usual coaxing manner she said: "Kolya, please, dear darling Kolya, don't be like that. Don't ever think like that. Just imagine how awful it will be for Pavel Gordeyevich if that happened. . ."

"Now look here!" Nikolai said firmly, taking his wife's hand in his. "Listen to me: as I see it, it is one of two things—either that girl isn't as nice as Pavel Gordeyevich thinks, or else Starodubtsev is lying! There can't be any other way of looking at it."

Annushka's face lit up as she snatched at this idea. Nikolai was right, there could be no other way of looking at it!

They decided to say nothing to Rogov and to behave as if nothing had happened.

But when he was talking to Rogov the next day Dubintsev in spite of himself stared at the engineer so intently that Rogov began to feel uncomfortable.

"What are you examining me for?" he asked. "Never seen me before?"

Dubintsev mumbled something about Pavel Gordeyevich having grown thinner of late. His eyes indeed were quite sunken.

"Nonsense," said Rogov. "It's Spring, and the nightingales keep me awake at nights and that's why I'm losing weight. Now what else did you want to take up with me?"

"That's about all, I think. If we can replace the timbering in Crosscut Seven within the next five days and put a battery locomotive on there, it might be a better idea to install the Makarov combine in Seam 27 "

"So you think we won't be able to include the Cherepanov crew in the mechanized line?"

"We can, of course, but. . ."

"They load by hand, is that it?" Rogov put in impatiently. "All right, we'll do as you say. The Komsomol crew can wait for Khomyakov's machine."

"They'll wait," Dubintsev confirmed "And with that new schedule of theirs they won't even notice it. I reported that to you."

"Yes, yes, I looked it over." For a moment Rogov pondered the matter. "That schedule has not been fully worked out as yet, but it is full of good rational ideas. Have you tried advising Cherepanov to wait a while?"

"I tried. Told him we ought to give some more thought to the matter. . . ." Nikolai broke off looking sheepish.

"Well?"

"He bristled all over like a porcupine, said he and Danilov would take it up with Bondarchuk."

"And so they did, so they did!" Rogov confirmed. "They went and complained, the young scamps! I admire them for that!"

Nikolai's face lengthened. "I don't see anything to admire," he remarked grumpily. "I'll get a good dressing down from Victor Petrovich for certain."

Rogov laughed. "Wait till I tell you what a splendid suggestion the Party organizer made. Cherepanov has drawn up his single-shift schedule for the 140-metre seam; he's been advised to go over it again, check his figures so as to have everything foolproof, but he insists on having the plan put into effect at once, claiming he has considered the matter thoroughly from every possible angle. How can you argue with a lad like that? Well, here's what we've decided to do: a week from now we'll get all the mine executives together and Cherepanov will report to them, deliver a regular lecture on his schedule, proving its superiority by sober argument. Now what do you think of that, eh?"

"Picture it, Kol, i," he added, his voice dropping almost to a whisper, his lean, open face glowing with youthful earnestness, "a miner delivering a lecture to engineers!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

Annushka had just tidied up the room and was standing by the window with the curtain pushed back looking out at the street where the snow was melting fast under the April sun when there was a tap at the door.

She turned round to see a tall, comely woman carrying a small suitcase standing in the doorway with a curious smile on her face. Annushka was so taken aback that she did not know what to say at first. She was about to ask the stranger what she wanted, but something familiar about the large, kind face of the woman checked her. She wanted to say "How do you do?" but she did not say that either. The visitor finally came to her assistance. With a faint nod of greeting she took off her coat in silence, pushed her shawl back from her head onto her shoulders and seated herself on the low trunk that stood by the wall.

"Come here and let me have a look at you, daughter!" she said.

Annushka hesitated, perhaps because having realized that the guest was her mother-in-law she did not quite like the idea of presenting herself for inspection. But the mother-in-law did not stand on ceremony. She drew the girl toward her, looked into her eyes and said in a tone of frank amazement: "You're such a slip of a girl to be a miner's wife." Whereupon she kissed her daughter-in-law resoundingly on both cheeks and on the lips and asked: "Is Kolya good to you?"

Within half an hour they were chatting away like old friends. Zinaida Ivanovna unpacked her bag and produced the gifts she had brought her children from the village, examined their meagre library in the corner and expressed her displeasure at the fact that there were so few books and that those they owned had obviously been picked up at random. What did these two babes read and did they read at all, for that matter? She would have to look into the matter properly later on. On the other hand, their electric cooking equipment was approved. In short, Annushka fell completely under the sway of her mother-in-

law's compelling personality from the first moment of their acquaintance.

Returning home after his talk with Rogov, Nikolai heard laughter coming from his room, and the sound of his wife's voice saying: "Oh, but, mother, Kolya won't like that!"

The room looked particularly cosy and inviting today. Something was hissing and bubbling on the stove and there was a savoury smell in the air. Annushka, in a white apron, her cheeks pink with excitement, was tacking a new carpet over the bed. Zinaida Ivanovna had moved the desk nearer to the window. The two women were screened from him by a golden shaft of sunlight.

Zinaida Ivanovna turned round, saw her son and threw up her hands. "Goodness gracious, what a great big miner he is!"

At dinner she plied her son with questions.

"Now tell me why must you hang about the pit eighteen hours a day? Doesn't the 8-hour day exist for you as it does for everybody else?"

Nikolai looked a trifle put out. "What about the state plan? ."

"I know the state plan has to be fulfilled. But why not fulfil it as a Communist should instead of behaving like some miserable little shopkeeper who wants to make sure that every kopek goes right into the till. The miners you work with are good Soviet men, aren't they? They are just as interested in the job as you are. Then why hover over them? There's nothing worse than a foreman who sticks his nose into every detail of the work, because he's afraid that something might go wrong if he isn't there."

"I do my eight hours in the pit," her son objected. "But I've got to put in a few extra hours for those who

can't keep the pace. It isn't my fault if all the workers don't work at the same pace. . . ."

A ripple of amusement spread over the mother's face. "What sort of a theory is that: 'so many hours for myself, and so many for the others.' Who taught you that? Rogov?"

And she proceeded to question her son closely about Rogov.

"He has taught me a lot," Nikolai said vehemently.

"And what has he learned from you?" Zinaida Ivanovna asked. "Tell me frankly—because that interests me too. You don't know? Very well then, here's what I say. You invite him over for a cup of tea. Tell him I'd like to meet him."

"Oh, but he's much too busy. . . ." Nikolai faltered. "You can't imagine what a big burden of work he carries on his shoulders."

"Rubbish!" cried Zinaida Ivanovna. "Are you all supermen here? One does the work of ten, and the other carries the whole mine on his shoulders. Busy! You ask him and see what he says."

Nikolai did so the very next day.

"About eight o'clock this evening, you say?" was all Rogov said. He consulted his plan of work for the day, scored something out and promptly at eight o'clock he arrived, bringing Stepan Danilov with him.

Stepan brought his accordion, much to everyone's delight.

Annushka will probably never forget that wonderful evening. A light frost drew feathery patterns in silver on the windowpanes, the shade of the table lamp cast a pleasant greenish light, and faint shadows lurked in the far corners of the room. And because of the moonlight outside and the stillness, broken now and again by the

hum of voices, their little room seemed to be sailing, sailing onward into the future.

Annushka had rather feared that her mother-in-law would ask Rogov a great many questions about himself, which might put the engineer on his mettle and everything would be spoiled. But Zinaida Ivanovna merely looked at his strong, well-knit figure, at his open face lined with fatigue, and going forward to meet him, said simply: "Welcome, Comrade Rogov!"

Stepan Danilov, just returned from a trip to Stalinsk where Tonya Lipilina was taking a course of treatment, seemed to be walking on air. He fairly radiated happiness. His voice was quite hoarse, but when he started singing to the accordion accompaniment it vibrated with an amazing power and warmth.

It was as if the song had been waiting for that evening, that hour and none other.

First they had tea, talking idly of this and that, and then Rogov turned to his friend. "Give us a song, Stepan!" he begged.

And Danilov sang, with his face uplifted and his fingers moving lightly over the cool mother-of-pearl keys.

The sky is bleak, the wind is shrill,
The snow with sky loes blend,
But winter's rigours cannot chill,
For I am with my friend.

No friend is he
Who drinks with me
To prove he is my friend;
The friend in need
Is the friend indeed,
The only certain friend.

A smile from him dispels the gloom,
Though wind and tempest roar;
A radiance seems to fill the room
When he steps through the door
It is not he
Who flatters me
On whom I can depend;
But it is he
Whose truth I see,
Who is my worthy friend.

Our schooldays were together spent,
From first form to the last,
When to the front we both were sent,
Our friendship grew more fast
Oh, many say,
When feeling gay,
That love shall never end,
But it is he
Who works with me
Who truly is my friend.

As we two labour side by side,
Our friendship aids and guides,
Together we are like the wings
On which the eagle rides

Stepan fell silent, his head cocked slightly to one side as if he was hearkening to the fading echo of his song.

Rogov hummed the tune of the refrain: " 'Together we are like the wings on which the eagle rides.' There is no song like the song that comes straight from the heart," he said.

"Folks sing as they live," observed Zinaida Ivanovna. She looked at each of the young people in turn, put her arm round Annushka's shoulders and nodding to the engineer, said: "Tell me something about your life in this bustling community, Pavel Gordeyevich."

Rogov smiled.

"Our life is such that we have no time to bustle, Zinaida Ivanovna."

"Life is like a fairy tale, eh?"

"I wouldn't say that," Rogov looked directly at the older woman, and a hint of sternness crept into his eyes. "No, Zinaida Ivanovna, fairy-tale life is dull. In fairy tales a man becomes happy at the wave of a magic wand. We build happiness with our own hands."

"You're boasting!" Zinaida Ivanovna teased him good-naturedly.

"No, I mean it." Rogov sprang up. "Look at us, at your son, your daughter, listen to Stepan's heart beats! And all because no people have ever felt themselves so necessary, so useful as our Soviet people!"

"All without exception?"

"There are exceptions, of course, but so few that they need not be taken into account."

Zinaida Ivanovna shrugged her shoulders dubiously.

"You're painting too rosy a picture. Aren't you leaving out the main thing—the struggle for the finer things in life, the struggle against routine and backwardness?"

"I'm not leaving that out!" Rogov interrupted. "That struggle is as necessary and as natural to us as drawing breath. . . . I don't make a tragedy out of it, because it is a struggle that does not maim our people spiritually. Yes, I know, I see quite well that there are some among us

who . . . well, how shall I put it . . . whose whole world is confined within the four walls of their home."

Zinaida Ivanovna laughed and shook a finger at Nikolai and Annushka. "You two had better look out!"

"That doesn't apply to us!" Nikolai protested, squaring his shoulders and looking a trifle hurt.

"You see?" Rogov went on, winking in the young man's direction. "That's where our happiness lies! Look about you and you will see how the shoots of the new are forcing their way up everywhere. Within a few days, for instance, one of our young miners will be lecturing to a group of engineers. An ordinary miner, although 'ordinary' is not quite the word to describe our Soviet miners today. Doesn't that speak volumes for life in our country today?"

"Life. . . ." The mother rose and walked thoughtfully across the room, pausing in front of Annushka and winding the girl's golden braid around her head like a crown. "That's something for you to think about, little daughter. You'll be bringing up your children in a new and wonderful time!"

"Now it's your turn to give an account of yourself, Zinaida Ivanovna," Rogov said, his eyes twinkling. "Nikolai tells me you're a deputy?"

"A deputy?" Zinaida Ivanovna smiled. "Yes, but besides that I am one of those whom your miners provide with light and warmth, and I should like to say here and now that I've no complaints to make. Not today at any rate."

"No complaints?" Rogov echoed, surveying the others with a look almost of triumph.

"No complaints!" Zinaida Ivanovna paced the room slowly, then paused beside her son and laying her hand

on his shoulder she said in a low voice. "I am a mother, Pavel Gordeyevich. The mother of men like Kolya, like Stepan, yourself. . . . I want you to be intelligent, hard-working and happy. And I want you to live. All mothers on earth want that."

Zinaida Ivanovna sat down beside Annushka who took the older woman's hand in hers affectionately. The greenish light from the table lamp lit up Annushka's gentle face with the lips slightly parted. Rogov stood by the window fingering the fringe on the curtain. Nikolai and Stepan sat side by side, their elbows on the table, their shoulders touching. One might have thought them all members of one happy family listening intently to the mother's words.

"I ought to be teaching kiddies in school," Zinaida Ivanovna was saying wistfully. "As a deputy I ought to be visiting the Kulunda collective farms, rejoicing in their successes, scolding the laggards. . . . After all, spring is here! And if you only knew what Spring is like in the Kulunda steppe. What a rich harvest is coming up there!"

Now Zinaida Ivanovna's features hardened and her gaze grew stern.

"But instead I am being called by the Anti-Fascist Committee. They want me to go to England with a delegation to talk to the ordinary women of England. It's high time for us women to start defending the peace!"

Rogov at the window drew himself up, Stepan and Nikolai took their elbows off the table, and Annushka slowly lowered her head. A note of wrathful sorrow rang in Zinaida Ivanovna's voice as she went on:

"Less than two years have passed since the war ended. The hospitals are still treating war invalids, hearts are

still aching with the pain of recent loss, and again we must muster all our forces to defend the peace!"

Rogov breathed on a blue feathery design on the windowpane and watched it turn dark as it melted.

"So you're going to England?" he asked.

"Yes," Zinaida Ivanovna sighed. "It is hard to get used to the idea of leaving my native country. After all, I've never been away before. . . ."

"Mother, tell the mothers of England. . . ." Nikolai began and glanced questioningly at the engineer.

"Yes, yes," Rogov caught up. "Tell them about the Kuznetsk land that lies in the heart of great Siberia, tell them that for the miners and steelworkers who live in the Kuzbas there is no greater happiness, no more enviable lot than the lot of the Soviet working folk! And tell them in England too that there is no force in the world that could take from the Soviet people that which by right they call their own!"

There was silence for a while. Somewhere far away a locomotive blew its whistle five times in succession, then twice more. The pendulum clock on the wall ticked solemnly.

"Why are you so quiet, Annushka?" said Zinaida Ivanovna

Annushka looked up. "I was thinking, mother, what a wise thing it was. . . . It is two years since fascist Germany ceased to exist, but the anti-fascist committees are still functioning."

Rogov and the others followed the direction of Annushka's glance. From the large portrait on the wall, shadowed slightly by the green lamp shade, the calm, wise face of Stalin looked into the room, into the world.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Cherepanov opened his eyes and blinked. A great white cloud seemed to be sailing straight at the window from the bottomless azure ocean of sky. Spring! Where but in Siberia would you see a spring like this? It comes suddenly, as if one fine morning the sun had reminded itself: "Wait, I haven't been to hard-working Siberia yet! It is still snowbound. That won't do. Here goes!"

And that starts it! Streams begin to gurgle, the snow settle and acquire a shiny brittle crust, dark patches appear in the forest glades and before the first little moss bank has time to dry up properly, a couple of lungwort blossoms will be gazing wide-eyed at the surrounding scene. And right beside them a snowdrop will unfold its transparent white petals, and in the gullies and ravines newborn rivulets set up a lusty babble.

If you listen carefully, early some bright morning when the velvety shadows still lie beneath the lower branches of the firs, you will hear the deep-throated clucking of the woodcocks in the distance, and closer by, what sounds like the silvery note of a horn as the elk trips along some secret path, from the direction of the marshes comes the loud chatter of the magpies and the staccato tapping of the woodpecker, and further on the whirring sound of two pairs of wild ducks in swift flight.

The day grows and spreads out until it seems there are no limits to it, and the air is like young wine—a breath of it is enough to make you tipsy.

Conscious of a pleasant ache in his joints, Cherepanov reached out for the clock on the bedtable. It was exactly two. "Gosh, you can snooze your whole life away like that!"

He turned over on his back and the sun caught him fair and square on the nose. He sneezed, once, twice, and burst out laughing. His body felt light as a feather, his head fresh and clear. Wait now, what was it he had to remember this morning?

Ah, yes! Aleshkov. Hadn't he come back from Pit No. 10 yet? Some delegate!

Aleshkov had been sent to Yemelyanov's crew with orders to find out why the Cherepanov boys' "opponent" seemed to have cooled off during the past two or three weeks. After all, only about two months ago Yemelyanov had boasted even in the newspapers that his crew was going to show the world a thing or two.

Cherepanov's lips twisted with irony. Show the world, would they! Secretly he hoped that Aleshkov would bring back the news that the Yemelyanov crew was a long way behind. And even if it wasn't, let it just try to catch up with the Cherepanov crew now that everything was ready to switch over to the new schedule. At any rate until May First there was no need to be afraid that anyone would be stepping on their heels.

Cherepanov calmed down a little at the thought and surveyed the spacious high-ceilinged room with satisfaction. By the walls stood two nickel bedsteads, with small tables beside them; in the corner there was a mirror and a wardrobe with all sorts of shiny knobs and handles. The window reached all the way from floor to ceiling—if you weren't careful you could fall out.

They had moved to this room only a week ago but they already felt as cosy and comfortable as if they had lived here all their lives. That was all Pavel Gordeyevich's doing. It was he who had thought first of the Komsomol crew when the new hostel was ready for tenancy. Barely had

the finishing touches been put to the place when he called them in to his office and read them the order assigning them new living quarters. Then for a lark he had lined them up and commanded:

" 'Tenshun! Count off. . . ."

"One!" Mitenka had piped up, stepping forward from the left flank.

Of course, counting off always began from the right flank. But it wasn't their fault if they didn't know any better, was it? They had been too young for the army at the time of the Great Patriotic War. Rogov, now, was another matter. It made you green with envy to see those three rows of decoration ribbons on his chest. And what about Danilov, a Hero!

As he thought of Danilov, the crew leader raised himself quickly on his elbow, and his thoughts took a more sober turn. Stepan Georgievich and Sibirtsev were working at this very moment. He wondered how they were making out. Perhaps he ought to phone down and find out.

But it was hard for him to tear his relaxed body away from this clean warm bed. "There's still time," he thought and stretching himself luxuriously, he closed his eyes.

The door, leading to the next room was slightly ajar and the sound of voices and laughter reached Cherepanov's ears. Mitenka was at it again. There was a lad who never seemed to get tired! Cherepanov strained his ears to catch the drift of the conversation.

"Go on!" he heard Sanka Lukin say scornfully. "As if it is possible to roof the whole pit with glass!"

"Why not?" Mitenka insisted. "We'll live to see it, you wait. 'We've had enough of groping about in the dark,' the miners will say. 'And we don't want electricity either,

we want sunlight in the mine and that's all there is to it.' 'Sunlight?' the engineers will say. 'Why, certainly, with the greatest of pleasure, all the sunlight you want!'

"So the upper layers of rock are removed right down to where the coal begins, rafters are put up and glass frames laid and there you are!"

"And the miner can walk around with his hands in his pockets and enjoy himself, is that it?" Lukin taunted. "You ought to have been a statesman, Mitenka, with that noodle of yours. All right, you've got a glass roof on your mine and the miners strolling around spitting over their left shoulders. But what about the coal now, I suppose it mines itself, eh?"

"Why itself?" Mitenka retorted hotly. "I was just kidding about the glass roof. But as for mining the coal, what do you think we have machines for? There'll be machines to hew the coal and load it and choose the right working too. The miner will just have to press the button. Yes, machines are the thing. Look at our Kapitalnaya. Everybody down there is learning to operate machines, even the trammers. Do you think they're just wasting their time?"

Cherepanov coughed. "If Mitenka did everything as well as he talks, he'd be worth his weight in gold," he reflected with some resentment. "To hear him now you wouldn't think he got a low mark at the combine-operators' courses just yesterday. Disgraced the whole crew and doesn't care a rap. I see I'll have to give that student a good talking to."

Cherepanov was about to get up when the long-awaited delegate finally arrived.

Aleshkov was another exasperating chap. He paid no heed to his crew leader's demand for an immediate report

on the results of his mission. Instead he slowly took off his outdoor things, combed his pitch-black mane before the mirror, carefully examined a pimple on his cheek, and finally announced that he had been to a housewarming party. Quite by chance too. A miner he knew had invited him.

"Sure!" Cherepanov remarked with biting sarcasm. "You're the big housewarming expert."

"No, really," Aleshkov said, livening up. "You know the fellow too, remember the one who kept shouting at the Stakhanovite rally: 'Who wants to compete with me? I'll take anybody on! Who's game?' Remember? A squint-eyed fellow with a pock-marked face. He's a card, that one. You ought to see the way he boasted about that new house of his, showed me almost every nail he'd knocked in."

Cherepanov emitted a hopeless sigh.

"As a matter of fact, that chap kept trying to persuade me not to go to the Yemelyanov crew. 'Keep away from those lads,' he said. 'What's the good of them. Sickening the way they work.' I wasn't any too anxious to go myself. . ." Aleshkov caught himself. "But since I'd been entrusted. . ." he added in a bored drawl.

"Never again!" Cherepanov hastened to console him.

"Since I'd been entrusted with the job," the delegate continued, ignoring the interruption, "I went."

He had first gone to Yemelyanov's home where he had helped with the sawing of a log of firewood, in reward for which service he had been treated to a mug of cold milk, real good milk it was too, not like the kind you get in the canteen.

"Go on, go on. . ." Cherepanov urged, near the end of his patience. "I suppose they've got a calf, eh? Why don't

you tell me about it? A jolly little fellow with a star on its forehead and a wiggly tail? Or maybe it can talk too?"

Aleshkov was visibly offended, but he refused to be provoked and continued with his story in the same unruffled manner.

He had seen the crew and been to the Komsomol Committee. The Secretary was a new man and he already had his hands full. The pit manager had announced the day before that he was going to disband the youth crew, because he didn't see the good of it with output dropping every day. Claimed that the boys had got too big for their boots.

"But that isn't it at all," Aleshkov said, moving closer to the crew leader. "They're having a hard time of it."

Cherepanov lay still for a minute digesting the intelligence. A storm of conflicting emotions seethed in his breast. He wanted a big victory, a real victory, for his crew, wanted it with all his heart. His whole being was concentrated on winning this victory. And now victory appeared to have come. Why, then, was there no joy in his heart?

The Yemelyanov boys were having a hard time of it. . . .

Cherepanov resolutely threw off the blanket, but before getting up he asked:

"What's Yemelyanov doing?"

"Yemelyanov?" Aleshkov echoed in surprise. "He's sick."

Cherepanov sat up in bed.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Appendicitis," Aleshkov announced with a good-natured smile.

"What do you mean, appendicitis?"

"I mean the ordinary, common or garden variety."

The airy indifference of Aleshkov's manner struck the crew leader as so outrageous that he could not contain himself any longer.

"You blithering ass!" he shouted, "you've got it all wrong!"

This time Aleshkov was offended in earnest.

"I haven't got anything wrong! His wife told me herself. 'Sevastyan was taken ill suddenly with appendicitis,' she said. His home life was all right, he had everything he could wish for, but work was plain torture. The seam was new, cut only a fortnight ago, a three-metre bed they hadn't worked on before; boreholes drilled any which way, blasting going on all the time and hardly any coal to show for it."

"Did you tell them anything about our method?"

Aleshkov smiled smugly. "What for? To give them a chance to catch up with us? I'm not as daft as all that!"

"Oh no, you're brilliant," snapped the crew leader, putting on his boots. He straightened up to find that Lukin and Mitenka had entered the room noiselessly. They sat down side by side and looked questioningly from the delegate to the crew leader.

What was to be done? Cherepanov stared out of the window. The huge white cloud was still floating slowly over from behind the hills.

"What are we going to do about it?" he said turning to his comrades. "It looks like we've won, doesn't it? We can go right down and shout the glad tidings to Chernov, so he can print a headline in today's paper: Cherepanov Crew Wins!"

Mitenka smiled a sickly smile.

"Of course. And see he puts in a word about Yemelyanov's appendicitis while he's at it."

"Doesn't sound like much of a victory to me," Lukin commented.

"Neither it is!" Cherepanov sighed. He swiftly pulled off his new leather boots and reached for his rubber boots. The others exchanged glances.

Mitenka was just about to open his mouth to say something when Cherepanov spoke.

"Get me two core bits from that drawer over there, Mitenka. Quick!"

There was silence in the room for a while after Cherepanov had left. Then Lukin said in a significant tone:

"Hm. . . ."

"Hm!" Mitenka echoed. "Looks as if our leader has gone off to give our method away gratis!"

"He's done the right thing, hasn't he?"

"Sure he has," returned Mitenka. "But he's too damn autocratic about it."

"Too what?"

"Autocratic, that's what! The method doesn't only belong to him. We're all competing with the Yemelyanov boys, aren't we? Cherepanov ought to consult the rest of us in a matter like this. For all he knows I might have some sound proposal to make!"

Lukin surveyed his comrade critically from head to foot.

"Hm . . ." he ejaculated again, but this time the sound had a distinctly dubious note.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Rogov, leaving Filenkov in charge of the office, had decided to go down the mine that morning and pay a visit to Dubintsev's section. He had just changed his clothes when Galya phoned and informed him rather peevishly that "the trust people had taken leave of their senses." They had withdrawn allocations for the work on the incline and had even refused to supply pumps and transporter belts. Perhaps Pavel Gordeyevich could do something about it?

Pavel Gordeyevich could, but Pavel Gordeyevich wanted to know what Galina Afanasyevna had been thinking of all this time. After all, Galina Afanasyevna was an engineer in charge of a whole section, surely she realized that she was expected to do more than sit back and wait passively for orders.

But he had to go to the trust after all. The manager was away, and so he was obliged to take up the unpleasant matter with the chief engineer.

"There's nothing especially to be worried about," Cherkashin said shrugging his shoulders, and he launched into a long discourse on the subject of budget appropriations. "But all this can hardly be news to the mine management? Everything has to take its turn. The coal field administration has approved the supplementary estimates which have been sent on to the ministry. Sanction should come through any day now. Everyone realizes how important the incline is for Kapitalnaya!"

"Not everyone! You don't, for instance!" Rogov snapped. "I need one hundred metres of belting and two pumps—the place is filled with water. It is a trifling amount of equipment but I must have it at once."

"I'm sorry. Every kilogram of equipment has been distributed." Cherkashin sat up in his chair and regarded Rogov sternly. "And as for who understands and who doesn't, Comrade Rogov..."

Rogov got up and walked out without another word. Returning to his office he spent the next two hours with the chief mechanic trying to ascertain what internal reserves they still had to draw on, only to find that there were no such reserves available. To make matters worse, the engineer on duty in the pit reported that only one and a half metres of the inclined shaft had been driven during the past twenty hours: the flow of water was heavy, there was a shortage of transport facilities.

Rogov asked where Voshchina was.

"She's been down there in the drift for three shifts running," the man replied, adding with a sigh "She's in such a temper, I'm afraid to talk to her."

"Temper..." Rogov dropped the receiver back on the hook "It's no wonder." He turned to the mechanic.

"Take one hundred and fifty metres of belting from the stores and send it down to the incline," he ordered.

"But that belting is for the Khomyakov combine!" the mechanic ejaculated in amazement. "We're going to install it any day now."

"I said that belting is to go to the incline and please don't argue about it," Rogov said.

He called up Dubintsev.

"Everything's ready," the technician reported eagerly. "I'm waiting for you, Pavel Gordeyevich. We've tested the combine and conveyors, we'll start them on the third shift. There's a bit of water, but the pumps are coping with it."

"Just a moment. . . ." Rogov hesitated in spite of himself, but took himself in hand at once and, with an impatient twitch of his shoulder, went on: "I'm calling off the celebration, Nikolai Victorovich. We'll have to wait with the conveyor for a week or two, I'm afraid. In the meantime two pumps must be transferred at once to the incline."

"Wha-at?" Dubintsev gasped. "What did you say, Pavel Gordeyevich?"

Rogov hung up with the technician's voice still ringing in the ear: "That knocks us out completely, Pavel Gordeyevich!"

"Never mind," Rogov said to himself. "We're a sturdy lot, it takes more than that to knock us out."

He wanted to go straight down to the incline and was rather looking forward to his encounter with Galya, Galya in a temper, but before he had finished reading over the latest instructions from the trust, Filenkov came in, or rather burst in, which was something he had never done before. Rogov had a momentary vision of Filenkov in the first period after his appointment as pit manager, sidling into the office with an absent air. And now. . . .

Filenkov came rushing into the room and glancing at Rogov through eyes narrowed with rage flopped into a chair only to spring up at once, and rummaging nervously in the pockets of his tunic he produced a small red card and flung it onto the desk.

Rogov scrutinized it with an air of studied incomprehension.

"What's this, Fyodor Lukich?"

"My pass as chief engineer of Kapitalnaya pit," he said hoarsely. "To hell with it!"

"To hell with what? The pit or the chief engineer?"

"With the chief engineer if he isn't worth taking into account."

"Very well." Rogov calmly opened the drawer of his desk and, picking the pass up delicately with two fingers, dropped it inside. "What else?"

"What else?" Filenkov's face actually contorted with indignation, but with an effort he controlled himself. "You can ask that after having committed so many outrages within the space of one hour? Kindly cancel your order immediately about the transporter belt and the pumps! I insist on it, I demand it!"

"And what about the incline? Let it be flooded?"

Rogov's calmness took the wind out of the chief engineer's sails. He made another attempt to raise his voice.

"You knew from the very outset that this partisan operation of yours was simply a matter of robbing Peter to pay Paul. I hope you haven't lost the capacity of comprehending simple things like that?"

"I hope not," Rogov said quietly.

"Then what made you do it?"

"The explanation is simple. We have no other alternative. I have taken a piece of living tissue and grafted it onto a part of our body where decay has begun to set in."

Filenkov threw up his hands, but Rogov's words had a soothing effect on him, and when he spoke it was in a calmer tone.

"Pavel Gordeyevich, listen to me. It is only since we began mechanizing on a big scale that I have really felt I have the right to call myself an engineer. I see now that until this happened my heart wasn't really in my work. But now I feel that I am bound by a living thread to every motor, every gear. Don't you think that I could have helped to find the pumps somewhere else with less damage?"

Rogov had ceased to consider whether Filenkov was right or not—most likely not. At that moment he was gazing with affection and something like admiration at the chief engineer and saying to himself: "The spark has flared up at last!"

"Pavel Gordeyevich!" Filenkov rose impatiently to his feet. "I'm waiting for you to say the word. I . . . I believe in you!"

They finally agreed that the transporter belt intended for the Khomyakov combine should go down to the incline; they would get another one for the combine somehow. As for the pumps, they could be removed from two drainage canals where they were practically standing idle.

"Well, that's a relief," Rogov confessed. "I must say I did not relish the prospect of facing Dubintsev's wrath."

About to leave, Filenkov turned back and said falteringly:

"Give it back to me, Pavel Gordeyevich!"

"Give what back?"

"My pass."

"The pass of the chief engineer of Kapitalnaya pit? With the greatest of pleasure!" Rogov said heartily. With a smile at the corner of his lips he watched Filenkov walk firmly toward the door. With his hand on the knob, the chief engineer spun round, shook a finger at Rogov and burst into a hearty laugh.

Coming out of the mine office later in the day Rogov bumped into Bondarchuk. They walked along together for a while through the puddles of melting snow glittering in the sunshine.

"Would you care to come down to the incline with me?" Rogov inquired.

Bondarchuk shook his head.

"I can't, much as I'd like to. I have a meeting in half an hour. By the way, have you prepared your report?"

"Why do you ask?" Rogov was surprised. "I agreed to do it, didn't I? The report is ready and I'll deliver it tomorrow."

"No, you won't. That's just the point, as Ivan Leonidovich would say."

"Why won't I?"

"Simply because you won't have the time. You'll have to go to the Regional Committee of the Party tonight, Pavel Gordeyevich."

"What?" Rogov almost shouted. In an instant he was transformed, he actually seemed to gain in stature. "So the question of mechanizing the pit is going to be taken up by the Bureau? Well, what did I tell you?"

"What did you tell me?" the Party organizer laughed.

"Of course . . . Don't you remember when we were signing the final data on labour productivity I said that this was the most vital, the most important item in our statistics. Wasn't I right?" Rogov winked and proceeded to climb the hill.

"Why don't you go through the pit?" Bondarchuk shouted after him. "It's much nearer that way."

"I prefer to take the hill," Rogov replied spreading his arms wide.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Cherepanov ran all the eight kilometres to Pit No. 10, his open jacket flapping in the wind, sweat stinging his eyes. Passers-by turned to look at him curiously—some with sympathy, others with amusement.

He was familiar with No. 10, for it was here that he had taken the practical part of the course at the vocational school. Now, however, when the cage came to a swinging stop and he stepped out on the level, everything looked strange and distasteful to him. Under the light of the lamps two huge puddles glistened with an amber sheen. The black hulks of two empty oval-shaped tubs stood at the concrete archway leading into a gallery. Through the frequent plopping of drops of water came the heavy sighing of a compressor somewhere in the distance, sounding as if someone were pounding on a feather bed, and a faint hiss issued from a near-by elbow of the compressed air pipe.

Cherepanov was about to set out for the face when he noticed a short, chubby youngster with a very grimy face perched on an upturned tram close by. He was wearing a huge pair of boots, quilted trousers and jacket. From under the cap a pair of blue eyes that did not quite seem to go with the narrow, coal-smudged face flashed challengingly. The youngster was chewing something, nodding his head and swinging his heel against the side of the tram.

"The shift's only started and he's feeding his face already!" Cherepanov thought with disgust. "Having a bite?" he asked.

"That's right. Any objections?" the young man's voice was surprisingly melodious and high-pitched. It somehow disconcerted Cherepanov.

"Oh no, none at all. . . . Go right ahead. . . ." He hesitated for a moment and then, remembering that he was in a hurry, inquired the shortest way to the third section.

The youngster laughed.

"Just follow your nose and you'll get there," he said, with a cough and a careless wave of the hand. But then

curiosity got the better of him. "Who are you looking for in the third?" he asked, subjecting the newcomer to closer scrutiny.

When Cherepanov replied that he was going to the young workers' crew, the lad quickly swallowed an unchewed mouthful and looked worried.

"You're not from the commission, are you?"

"Me?" Cherepanov was unprepared for the question, but he recovered himself at once. "That's right," he lied, "from the commission."

In a flash the youngster slipped off his perch and dashing behind the tram, bent down and whispered to someone ensconced there:

"Grisha! Genka! Get up! The commission's come!"

To Cherepanov's surprise two husky youths emerged from behind the tram with dismay written on their sleepy faces. Remembering that he was supposed to be a member of a commission, he decided on offensive action.

"What's this, a one-shift rest home?" he said bitingly.

The bigger and more intelligent-looking of the two youths shrugged his shoulders and, not knowing what to do with his hands, shoved them into his trouser pockets. Finally the story came out: their crew leader was sick and Comrade Andrei Gushcha, who was deputizing for him, had taken over the seam to set a record that day.

"Aha . . ." the "commission member" said ominously. "And what are you supposed to do, stand by and cheer him?"

No, but they had no place to work. The biggest of the youngsters stared helplessly down at his feet.

"Who are you anyway?" asked the smallest of the three.

"Me?" Cherepanov spun around to face him. His temper was rising, and to prevent himself from shouting he spoke with slow deliberation. "I am Cherepanov. That's who I am and I'm ashamed to be competing with chaps like you. Take me to the facet!" And he walked through the concrete arch of the gallery.

The young men exchanged glances. The black-faced one whistled but the lad who had spoken with Cherepanov hissed at the offender:

"Pipe down, Sashka. . . ."

Cherepanov was prepared for a cool, if not downright hostile reception from Comrade Andrei Gushcha, and with that eventuality in view he had rehearsed a whole speech with references to his personal experience and the prestige of his crew. But his fears proved unfounded. Laying down the pneumatic drill and giving the newcomer a tired smile, Gushcha gripped his hand warmly.

"Sorry, friend, but we're not making out so well. . . ."

And Gushcha launched into a rather long-winded account of his crew's troubles. Cherepanov felt uncomfortable. To his mind it was humiliating to complain — degrading to one's self-respect. "Lost their gumption," he thought as he stood there scowling and shifting from one foot to the other, but for all that he listened attentively.

The Yemelyanov crew themselves could not understand how they had lost their prestige. It was not because they shirked work, for they were all eager to work—to make a good showing. Nor was the crew leader's illness the cause of the trouble. The main reason was the abrupt change in working conditions. They had always worked

in a thin seam, and now they had been shifted to this three-metre coal bed. At first they had been happy about it, for the coal looked as if it would come down of itself. But when they got down to actual work, things turned out differently—they could not even scrape up the quota. They tried it this way and that, but nothing came of it, no matter how hard they worked. Only yesterday Yemelyanov had called his assistant to the hospital, and when the latter got there, had pulled out the local paper from under his pillow and stuck a finger at an article under the headline "Glory!" It was about Cherepanov's crew, he said.

"Now what have you to say for yourself!" he had said sternly.

Recalling the unpleasant moment, Gushcha scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

"There really wasn't much to say!"

He and Sevastyan Yemelyanov had agreed definitely that something had to be done to bolster up the crew's spirits. The arrangement was that Gushcha was to show the others an example or bust, and do it no later than today.

"Well, how is it coming along?"

"Not so well . . ." Gushcha confessed. "I fired three shots in that bench but the coal won't budge. . . ."

"Sure it won't, if you go about it that way," Cherepanov mumbled. "Got a decent shot-fire?"

"Not bad," Gushcha said. "See . . . that one down there." He jerked his chin toward the lower end of the working.

Cherepanov turned and saw a pert face looking up at him through the gloom. It was the sharp-tongued young-

ster he had already met, but Cherepanov said nothing. Digging into his pocket and producing two core bits of his own design, he put one into the astonished Gushcha's hand and attached the other to an unused drill nearby, at the same time calling over Grisha and Genka who had been watching his every move.

"This is what we're going to do," he said in a tone of finality. "I'll take Yemelyanov's place as crew leader. We're not going to set any records, we'll just hew coal according to plan. You do the timbering," he nodded at Grisha and Genka, "and Andrei and myself will tackle the face. We'll go through the full breadth of the seam and blast three steps at a time from underneath. After the shots the two of us will clear the face, and later on I'll go back to drilling."

"But remember," Cherepanov continued after a brief pause, "there must be no getting in each other's way, and what's most important, we've got to hustle. As soon as the coal's been removed the props have got to go up—and mind you, at once. The roof gets tired of hanging without support from below, especially in a place like yours. . . Well," he flashed the beam of his lamp against the breast of the seam and then at the faces of his comrades, "let's get started."

When the coal first came crashing down in the working the foreman who happened to be passing in the gallery below muttered indifferently:

"Hm! The record's coming through at last. . . ."

But when this was followed by several more detonations, and then another series, the foreman got worried: "Are they mad, burning up explosive like that!" Before he got to the seam, however, he met Genka who demanded more timber.

"We've got to have it right away, or else..." he said and dashed back without explaining what the alternative might be.

Genka's precipitate appearance evidently impressed the shift foreman, for the timber came without delay. Then there were the empties to be supplied, one more chuteman had to be put on the job, more timber was wanted and still more empty trams. The foreman was kept busy enough, but his spirits rose. At the end of the shift he shouted up the manhole:

"Hey you there! When're you going to let up?"

In reply there came the intermittent hammering of the drills as before, the ring of an axe and the crunching and rumbling of the avalanche of coal as it tumbled down into the chute from somewhere above.

... Cherepanov stopped his drill and listened. Below, the last chunks of coal were rattling down the empty chute. Sitting down next to him, Gushcha wiped the sweat off his brow and glancing at Mikhail from under his upraised arm broke into a broad smile.

"Hard work, but damn exciting! Yemelyanov will like this!"

"Listen, where did that black-faced youngster disappear to?" Cherepanov asked. "He knows his job all right. You'd never think it... to look at him..."

"What did I tell you?" Gushcha felt flattered. "They're all hard workers."

After a hot shower the two sat down in the shower house corridor for a smoke. It was time for Cherepanov to leave, for he had a long way to go, but he felt so elated that he simply had to stay and talk.

"You got to go in for breaking shots, you know, driving the shot holes at an angle to each other. Then you put

a full charge in the outside holes and only a little bit in the two inside ones—just enough to stir the coal,” he instructed Gushcha. “Don’t forget to tell that to the shot-firer. . . .”

“Here she is herself,” the other interrupted him.

“She?” Cherepanov looked up, and saw a girl coming toward them. No doubt about it, a girl with two funny-looking pigtails, a slender figure and a pert little face. But the blue, shining eyes belonged to the black-faced lad whom Cherepanov at one point during the shift had called “butterfingers.”

Feeling the blood slowly rising to his face, Cherepanov shifted nervously on the bench and hastened to cover up a rent in his trouser knee with his hands. He was completely tongue-tied, and even when Gushcha invited him to run in more often to see the crew he only mumbled indistinctly and coughed.

He was hardly more talkative half an hour later when he and the girl (her name was Shura) were walking together through the pitch-black but warm April night. He preferred to listen to her as he strode along, intent on avoiding the crunching patches of ice. And finally when he was left alone he stood for a while, holding his right hand in his left. Then he turned to look at the small cottage into which the girl had disappeared, looked at the palm of his hand which she had brushed with her warm, roughened fingers, and laughed softly.

CHAPTER XL

Whether it was because of the natural feeling of tender affection he had for his fellow men, or because work that day had gone so smoothly and so well, Mitenka, as he emerged from the pit with Lukin after the shift, was

suddenly seized by a passionate desire to do a good deed, to perform some act of kindness that would be as fresh and warm as Spring itself.

Coming up to the surface he marvelled at the flood of sunshine over Mt. Elban, raised his head and let a few drops of melted snow from the roof fall on his face, and even tried some on his tongue; then he paused to watch the meeting between Tonya's mother, Maria Tikhonovna, and Stepan Danilov.

"You must be tired, Stepan," said Maria Tikhonovna. "I have a letter from Tonya. Come along and we'll read it together."

"A letter! That's great news, mother!" Stepan took her by the arm and they set off.

Too bad they had said so little and that Mitenka had not had time to add a few words of his own. There was so much he wanted to say, so much, that he was fairly bursting with it. In this frame of mind he couldn't go to the hostel; Cherepanov was bound to remind him of some past misdemeanour, like the way he had flunked the mechanization exam last year. No, there was no point in going to the hostel.

For an hour or so he went about the office exchanging greetings with friends and acquaintances and feeling more and more elated after each handshake. Then he carefully examined all the bulletin boards and decided that the situation in the mine gave no cause for concern. What was most important, the approach of May Day was making itself strongly felt. It was a pity that two such crews as Cherepanov's and Nekrasov's hadn't chalked up yesterday's output yet. That clerk in charge of the bulletin board ought to be given a talking to. Mitenka stared so long into the little window behind which sat the senior

accountant that the latter finally took off his glasses and said:

"Now then, Mitenka, out with it. What's eating you!"

"Me, Philip Philipich?" Mitenka scratched his nose thoughtfully. "You know I haven't had much of an education. But I do know something about figures. And I was just wondering how much time it takes for a miner's shift to be turned into figures and how much more for those figures to talk? Eh? A purely theoretical question, eh, Philip Philipich?"

The accountant grinned and called to someone at the back of the room

"Nastya, have you chalked up the index figures for all the crews yet? You haven't? Well, next time I'll send you straight to Mitenka. He'll give you a theoretical talking to."

Then he had dinner in the canteen. After his meal he asked for the Book of Complaints and Suggestions and delivered himself in writing of the opinion that the kitchen personnel on duty that day deserved to be commended; the waitress had been extremely polite and obliging, and the vases of flowers on the tables were very nice. The scent of flowers was good for a man's soul.

Afterwards he went to the savings bank, but found it closed. Now that was too bad. After all, there might be other people besides Mitenka who wished to transact business in the savings bank, and here the place was closed for some unknown reason. Bad management. And so Mitenka went to the medical dispensary, not because there was anything the matter with Mitenka's health, but merely because he was curious to know what his fellow men were doing.

At first he wandered along the corridors in silence, but soon the yearning for companionship was too much

for him and he struck up a conversation with one or two people, talking to them as if he had known them all his life.

"Now then, mother," he said to an old woman waiting to see the doctor. "Why don't you go straight in? Let me knock at the door for you. I'm sure he'll receive you."

Seeing a girl with a bandaged face standing by the wall, he said: "It must be hard for you to stand, sister. Why don't you sit down? The comrades will move up a bit."

The comrades did so and there proved to be room on the bench for another patient.

A baby began to cry lustily at the other end of the corridor and Mitenka hurried toward the sound. The baby stared at his kindly, bulging eyes, his broad face with the protruding ears and the reddish fuzz on his upper lip and suddenly stopped crying, dribbled and waved its chubby little fists.

Evening was approaching. It was time to be going home. But Mitenka decided instead to drop in to Danilov and pick up his accordion—and its owner as well if he would come. The fellows in the hostel would enjoy a bit of music.

It wasn't until he'd reached the second floor that he remembered that Danilov had gone off with Tonya's mother after the shift and would probably remain there talking till the morning. Rogov wasn't home either—he had left for Kemerovo the day before. Mitenka was a little downcast at the thought that he would have to go home without the accordion. But it couldn't be helped. There was always the radio.

As he was coming out of the house he bumped into a young woman just going in. She was wearing a dark hat and carrying a suitcase. He looked her over with curios-

ity--she was obviously a stranger to the town. He was about to step aside to let her pass when the girl said: "Excuse me, comrade, do you live in this house?"

No, he didn't live in this house, but if there was anything he could do for her, he would be only too glad.

"Thanks," said the girl. "I'm looking for Rogov's apartment."

"Rogov?" Mitenka actually started with joy. "Why, he lives right here, honest he does! Second floor to the right. But I'm afraid you'll have to come some other time. Pavel Gordeyevich isn't here, he was summoned to the Regional Party Committee."

The girl gave a mirthless little laugh.

"I can't come some other time. I've just come from the train, from Novosibirsk, and I'm leaving tomorrow morning early."

Mitenka scrutinized the girl's face, shadowed slightly by her hat.

"You're . . . you're Valya Yevtyukhova, aren't you?"

"Why, how did you know?"

"Oh, I guessed . . ." Mitenka stopped in confusion, then in a tone of genuine commiseration he added: "Really you two are terribly disorganized. It's shame!"

"Disorganized?" Valya laughed gaily. "What's your name, by the way? Dmitri? Mitya, eh? All right, Mitya, you can help me to open Pavel Gordeyevich's flat. I've simply got to get in!"

. . . Mitenka returned to the hostel in a state of bliss. The good deed he had sought for half a day had come upon him unawares.

Valya had not yet removed her hat and coat when a little old woman came in. It was she who had handed

over the keys of Rogov's flat at Mitenka's request. Khomyakova was her name, Maria Dmitrievna Khomyakova.

Folding her dry little hands beneath her apron, Maria Dmitrievna observed in a tone of maternal admonition: "Well, well, it's about time. . . ."

Valya flushed with embarrassment and was instantly furious with herself for behaving like a schoolgirl caught at a rendezvous.

"I said thank God you've come at last," Maria Dmitrievna repeated. "A man's patience wears out, you know, even a man like Pavel Gordeyevich."

"Do you think his is worn out?" Valya asked with a laugh that sounded artificial even to herself.

"Who knows?" replied the old woman. "It isn't easy to tell what goes on in a man's soul unless you know him well. I see quite a lot of Pavel Gordeyevich and I've been keeping my eye on him. Sometimes he's very good company, but sometimes it hurts to look at him. He has a big heart, but there's no one to show him a little tenderness. . . . But I don't want to vex you," Maria Dmitrievna pulled herself up. "Make yourself comfortable. If you need anything just drop across to my place. We're going to be neighbours now anyway. I'm alone too at present, and all because of Pavel Gordeyevich; he's sent my old man to the other end of the Kuzbas."

Neighbours! Valya pressed her hands to her cold cheeks.

After a while she switched on the light and surveyed the large room with the two beds. Why two? Oh yes, Pavel had written to her about the army comrade who was staying with him. But where was that comrade? At that moment the need to hear something about Rogov was almost a physical ache. How was he? His letters were

full of mine affairs, with an occasional remark about some new book he had read, or rarer still, about a film he had seen. But mostly he wrote about the pit. . . . And people, so many people.

On the big desk between two piles of newspapers and magazines she saw her own portrait, an enlarged photograph taken during her student days. On top of the magazine lay a note: "Pavel Gordeyevich, I'm off to Stalinsk again tomorrow. Greetings. S. Dan." That must be the Stepan Danilov Rogov had written her about.

On the bed lay an open book: Julius Fučík's *Notes From the Gallows*. She picked it up and read the concluding sentence underlined in red pencil: "People, I loved you. Be ever vigilant!"

There, it was enough to touch Pavel's things and glance at the books he read to hear the beating of his heart, and feel the rich life that coursed in his veins, "People, I loved you!"

"Good evening," a voice behind her suddenly broke into her thoughts. "Excuse me, I saw the light in the window and I thought Pavel Gordeyevich was home . . ."

Before she turned round Valya had time to reflect that a voice like that could belong only to a very beautiful woman, beautiful and young. The next instant she realized with mixed feelings of amusement and chagrin that she had guessed right.

The visitor's eyes ran swiftly from Valya's face to the portrait on the desk and were instantly veiled by her thick lashes.

"No, Pavel . . . Gordeyevich is not at home. Neither is Danilov."

Valya smiled to herself, and examining the girl more boldly, she said with disarming candour:

"It is rather discouraging to find no one here to receive me. Would you mind keeping me company for a while? It will give us a chance to get acquainted."

Their eyes met for an instant as they shook hands. Galina Voshchina. Valya repeated the name to herself, noting the fact that for some reason Pavel had not written her about this girl.

Conscious still of a certain feeling of constraint, Valya applied herself with exaggerated zeal to the preparation of tea. She peeped in the cupboard and on the shelves and produced tea, sugar and a can of some tinned food. She poured water into the little round tea kettle, but discovered that the electric stove didn't work and was obliged to solicit the aid of her new acquaintance. She could not help admiring the deft way the girl handled the contacts, the speed with which she took the plug apart and put it together again. Regarding her ash-blond hair and the faint powdering of golden fuzz on her cheeks she recalled a bantering phrase in one of Pavel's letters written the previous autumn: "You'd better watch out with that dissertation of yours you're liable to lose Rogov."

Valya found herself thinking that she and this girl were very much alike in some curious way she could not explain. Most likely, she told herself, the resemblance was limited to a few external features they had in common.

They were of approximately the same height, Valya was perhaps slightly taller. Voshchina too had a clear, open face with softly moulded lips and her hair was wound into a tight knot at the nape of her neck (As she noted this, Valya for some reason involuntarily tossed her braids over her shoulders) But the main difference lay in the eyes: little dancing lights flickered every now and then in Galina's large, slightly wondering eyes.

Valya remembered how often Rogov had used to reproach her for being, as he put it, amazingly even-tempered.

"You're like one of those icebergs, nine tenths of which are concealed under the water," he said. "You keep everything hidden inside of you. When I am with you I feel like sitting with downcast eyes and earning excellent marks for behaviour."

Valya laughed to herself at the memory. "Poor Pavel," she thought, "he never did succeed in getting those excellent marks."

Over their tea, Valya talked about her forthcoming trip with Professor Skitsky's expedition to the upper reaches of the Tom River.

"Do you think we know so very much about the Kuznetsk area?" she said.

Galya nodded. "I think we know a great deal, but we need to know far more. I think that the days Kuznetsk folk have dreamed of so long are here at last. A member of one of the first geological expeditions to the Kuzbas wrote in 1841, a hundred years ago: 'One day a full, rich life will blossom out in these backwoods!'"

"A full rich life! Yes, Russian pioneers travelled far and wide in search of that life Pioneers!" Valya stopped short. "Forgive me for sounding dramatic, this is my favourite topic, it has always been my weakness." And casting a sidelong glance at Galya, she asked slyly: "Don't people like Pavel remind you of those original Siberian pioneers?"

Galya nodded faintly but said nothing. And the next minute they were deep again in a discussion of the scale of geological prospecting planned for that summer. Coal, bauxites, iron ore, manganese, gold. . . . Mountain crags

and valleys with boundless lush meadows, forests and the power latent in the swift torrent of blue rivers.

"There's no doubt that the scale of our work is very impressive," Galya went on and a frown came over her face. "But the trouble is that the geologists so far are mainly spreading out farther afield, marking out the locations of rich deposits, whereas they should have worked deeper down into them a long time ago." She paused for a moment, casting a swift glance at Valya. "I am not a geologist, Valentina Sergeyevna, but I know that the day-to-day geological survey service so important in mining is poorly organized in our trust. After all, this is the Kuzbas with its unique coal deposits. The seams are either vertical or fan up at a sharp angle almost to the surface. To mine a seam you must know the entire field to the last detail, all its faults and outcroppings of rock and what not. All our technical projects and the whole production end depend on that."

"We do not always make thorough enough surveys," Galya went on with a rather shamefaced smile. "That's the case even at Kapitalnaya. Here we are moving down to the deep strata, but we don't really have an absolutely clear picture of them."

"You're right I have thought about that," Valya assented.

"I have been looking into the data at the Geological Administration on the deposits here, and I must say I am surprised to see how little attention has been paid to the Shushtalep suite, for example. . . . But I don't know whether I can help you in any way."

"Why don't you come and work with us!" Galya said, looking the other squarely in the face. "That is . . . if it fits in with your personal plans. . . ."

"You mean, if I marry Pavel?" Valya said, and pulled herself up sharply. "That I cannot say."

A grave, almost guarded look crept into Galya's eyes, and she said nothing.

The next minute Valya asked whether Pavel did much visiting, after working hours, of course.

Galya paused before replying and smiled.

"I haven't noticed that he has much time for visiting. But he did come to see us once. As a matter of fact, I even sang for him. That is . . . my weakness."

"Pavel sings too," Valya remarked, "but he has rather a tendency to roar."

They laughed. The clock struck midnight. It was a windy night and the windows rattled. Galya rose to take her leave. She had to be at work at six o'clock in the morning.

"And I have to be on my way early," Valya said ruefully.

"Then you . . . you won't wait?"

"No, not this time." Valya rose quickly. "I need to see him only for one moment," she added, unable to suppress the peevish note in her voice. "He must . . . he must try to understand me!"

Valya's word struck a jarring note. Galya gave her a searching look and her lips unconsciously set into a thin line of disapproval. They took leave of each other coldly and it was hard to believe that they had just been chatting like old acquaintances.

.. Before she fell asleep under Rogov's rough army blanket, Valya reread the words in Fučík's book underlined in red: "People, I loved you!"

As she dozed off she seemed to hear Pavel's voice from afar saying:

"People, I love you!"

With her eyes still closed, Valya lay in bed wondering how she could have slept all through the night without once waking up. It was incredible to have slept so peacefully after all the mental anguish she had suffered on her way here, picturing to herself in every detail her forthcoming meeting with Pavel, imagining how his face would light up when he saw her and hearing his words of greeting so awkward, yet so tender and heart-warming. She shied away uneasily from the thought of what she was going to say to him, and how she would explain the reason for her coming.

Oh, why had they made such a mess of things?

She raised her eyelids slightly and a rainbow flickered in her lashes. That meant sunshine and a clear translucent sky; perhaps that would make her heart feel less heavy.

But suddenly the sunshine seemed to have dimmed a little. She opened her eyes wider and instantly grew tense. Someone was standing by the desk. She could not see his face nor what he was doing yet a nameless fear seized her. For who if not Rogov could have come into the room while she slept and waited patiently for her to wake up Rogov!

She tried to rise, but she could only move her hand, she wanted to say "Good morning, Pavel" but the words would not come.

A minute passed, perhaps more. She was waiting for something. She dared not open her eyes fully. And Rogov stood there without moving. At last the tension became unbearable. She felt that she must surely cry aloud with shame at her helplessness, but instead she forced herself to take a closer look at the figure by the desk. And when

she saw that it wasn't Rogov, she involuntarily sighed with relief.

But who was it?

She stirred slightly, drew the blanket up to her chin and was about to sit up when the telephone rang so loudly and insistently that even the man at the desk started and waved his hands: "Hush there! Hush, you. . ." he said in a loud whisper.

Then he ran on tiptoe across the room, picked up the receiver and covering the mouthpiece with both hands he hissed: "Sh . . . Sh! For goodness' sake! No, he's not here. He hasn't come back yet. Good-bye, good-bye." Adding under his breath as he hung up, "Blast your hide!"

Valya laughed out loud. The stranger swung round and nodded in confusion.

"Oh, good morning," he stammered.

Now Valya was able to have a good look at him. He was a well-built young man, not tall, with a rather long face peppered with freckles. But it wasn't the face as a whole you noticed so much as the eyes; they were blue flecked with hazel and they regarded you steadily and a trifle searchingly so that you involuntarily pulled yourself together to meet their challenge. Valya could not help thinking as she looked at the young man how deftly Rogov could describe people. With a few words he could draw a remarkably lifelike portrait. She recalled his description of Danilov in a recent letter: "Well-set-up, medium height, an unremarkable face, freckles, but what eyes! Blue, a trifle stern, but apt to blaze at times. I love him for those clear blue eyes of his, in which the man is before you like an open book."

"Good morning, Stepan Danilov!" she replied, and stretched her hand out to him from under the blanket, but

observing that he had not yet recovered from the shock of her unexpected awakening, she nodded and said: "All right, Stepan . . . Georgievich, I am going to get up."

And when Danilov had withdrawn to the other side of the little screen, she said:

"I hope my intrusion into your bachelor abode has not put you out too much?"

Stepan laughed.

"This bachelor abode is happy to have you. We're jolly nice people around here, you know," he added jocularly.

"Yes," Valya sighed. "Very nice people."

"And that's putting it mildly," Danilov went on in the same light vein, making a clatter with the kettle. "Very mildly, in fact."

"Now you mustn't boast," chided Valya, "or I'll have to change my mind about you."

"Go ahead, go ahead," bubbled Stepan. "We can stand it. Now I'm going to make you a nice cup of tea and then I'll have to run off and leave you to carry on here by yourself."

"Dear me, I didn't think you'd trust me that much!" Valya stepped out from behind the screen and offered Danilov her hand for the second time. "Good morning to you, Stepan Georgievich."

Danilov shook her hand warmly and looking into her eyes with an unfeigned surprise, he faltered:

"I . . . I didn't think you'd be like this. . . . I judged you by your photograph . . . and I thought. . ."

"Well, what did you think?"

"I thought you were the delicate kind. . . . The sort a puff of wind blow over."

"And now you see you were mistaken, is that it?" Valya urged him provocatively.

"Yes. Pavel Gordeyevich was right. You are the proper sort!"

"Oh thanks, Stepan Georgievich!" Valya said, flushing with pleasure. "Do you know I actually feel as if I were the proper sort now, although I'm not quite sure what it means!"

While she helped Stepan to get their simple breakfast, Valya told him about the trip from Novosibirsk, what a busy time this was for geologists and how happy she was that it was spring again, the season of the year when there was so much to do that the days were all too short.

She talked on and on, subconsciously putting off the moment when she could no longer avoid talking about Rogov. Danilov seemed aware of this, and though he listened attentively to everything she said, his expression grew graver and more guarded. Several times they were interrupted by telephone calls. Valya, listening to his end of the conversation, noticed that he spoke in the calm confident tone of one who knows his business thoroughly. She asked him what work he was doing in the mine and Danilov replied that he was a hewer and that he worked with a very fine crew, and there was such a note of pride in his voice when he said it that she could not help smiling.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked a little hurt.

"I'm sorry, Stepan Georgievich," Valya said in some confusion. "You see, I gathered that you were talking to one of your chiefs at the mine just now, but your tone..."

"... wasn't the tone of a subordinate, you mean?" Stepan finished for her. "Well, there's nothing strange about that. We may have different functions on the

job, but our function in life is the same—to be worthy human beings, the masters of our own destinies.”

“Did you think that up yourself?”

“No, I heard our Party organizer Victor Petrovich say it, but I endorse it one hundred per cent.” Stepan was silent for a few minutes, then looking her full in the face he asked point-blank:

“Valentina Sergeyevna, have you come . . . for good?”

She could have hesitated for a moment before answering, she could have pretended not to have heard his question, but she hadn't the courage to do either. She got up, walked away from the table, then came back and forcing herself to meet Danilov's expectant gaze, she said in a low voice

“No, not for good.”

“That's a pity.” Danilov's shoulders dropped and he paused for a few moments before at last he said “A pity it's all so complicated, isn't it? If you only knew how Pavel Gordeyevich was looking forward to your coming. He was so sure you would come soon.”

“You say he was sure of it?” Valya asked sharply. “He took it for granted that I would come, no matter what happened! Oh, there's no use discussing this now.” And she turned her face to the window, away from Danilov.

But she could not keep silent any longer. The pent-up resentment, frustration, the longing to pour her heart out to someone, to try to understand what had happened between herself and Rogov was too strong for her; and the words came gushing forth as if it were Rogov and not Danilov sitting there listening silently to her.

What could have happened to their relations if she could not even speak about them coherently, but had to

stumble and stammer and search for some smooth-sounding, streamlined phrases with which to express herself? What had happened?

"One thing I know..." Valya no longer hid her face from Danilov, and her cheeks were flaming. "One thing I know," she repeated. "We made a terrible mistake when he came back from hospital. Pavel should never have let me go."

"But was it all right for you to let him go?" Danilov interrupted. "Was that right?"

"I don't know..." Valya replied dully, then went on hurriedly and more loudly. "You don't understand me, Stepan, you don't understand. That isn't what I meant to say. I have faith in Pavel, and he has faith in me and quite rightly. I'm only saying that life is like that.... You can't tear him away from the Kuzbas, and I am a geologist, after all, and do you know what that means? Life for me means roaming over the earth, searching for new wealth to make man's life richer. I couldn't sit in one place a single spring, a single summer!"

"There's something wrong with that explanation, Valentina Sergeyevna," Danilov said. He sighed, got up and began pacing the room, walking slowly from one corner to another, with his head a little bowed. "Yes, there's something wrong with it. You make it appear that it is your work, the work you love so much, that has forced you apart. And you see how wrong that is? It isn't as if one of you had to go to the moon on account of that geology of yours; after all you are both living here on earth! If you ask me, it isn't geology that's to blame...." He stopped in front of the girl and regarding her with sympathy, said in a conciliatory tone: "Forgive me, Valentina Sergeyevna. It isn't for me to tell you, a

grown-up woman and an engineer to boot, how to order your life."

Valya winced. "What has my being an engineer got to do with my making a mess of things, Stepan Georgievich?"

They talked for a little while longer of this and that, but the sincerity and directness were gone. Danilov had involuntarily withdrawn into himself and Valya's thoughts too were far away. Danilov tried to rouse himself to tell her about the mine, about the Cherepanov crew but what he said sounded so flat and uninteresting that he broke off in the middle of a sentence. He looked up at the clock and announced that Pavel Gordeyevich would be coming back from Kemerovo on the evening train.

"No, no!" Valya almost sprang up, but caught herself and to hide her confusion she began to fumble with the straps of her travelling bag. "I cannot wait, Stepan Georgievich. I have to take the afternoon train to Tash tagol I wanted to leave this morning I'll write Pavel a note, because I must go at once"

And while she was writing the note, her head bent low over the paper, Danilov strode up and down the room again and his step was heavy as if he carried a great weight on his shoulders. Now and then he glanced darkly at the girl and the furrows on his forehead deepened

Once again before she left Valya gave vent to the feelings that racked her. A note of real pain sounded in her voice as she handed Stepan the note with the words:

"Stepan Georgievich, please give him this letter the moment he comes. And tell him tell him, that I am terribly unhappy about everything."

The station buildings moved more and more slowly past the train windows, a shunting engine whistled close by and at last the train drew to a stop.

For some time Valya sat motionless, looking out of the window with a heavy heart and taking in almost nothing of what she saw. She sat there until someone touched her arm, and she heard the anxious voice of Skitsky beside her.

"Valya. . . Valentina Sergeyevna, are you not well?"

She looked up at the professor and caught her breath, not because of the joy (now tinged slightly with anxiety) that always lit up his face when he saw her, but because she was painfully conscious of a complete absence of any such joy within herself.

She stood up and shook hands with Skitsky who led her to the waiting car, fussed over her and questioned her with undisguised concern about her trip and her health. But she replied absently to him for all the time she was thinking, thinking, trying to understand what it was that bound her to Skitsky when the whole fabric of their relationship could be swept away by one brief trip to the Kuzbas. How could she go on like this!

She heard his voice as through a dream and she turned to him swiftly.

"Vasili Panteleyevich," she said, "please do not ask me about my trip just now. . . ."

Skitsky nodded in deference to her wishes, and after a brief pause he said:

"Perhaps you will let me show you my new apartment? I have made several rather interesting additions to my library since I saw you last. . . ."

"The apartment?" Valya was at a loss at first, then she said quickly: "No, not today, Vasili Panteleyevich. . . . Tomorrow perhaps. I'll tell you later. . . ."

Skitsky made an involuntary movement toward her, but noticing how her hands trembled he controlled the impulse and tactfully changed the subject. He spoke about the trip they intended taking together to Moscow and about plans for the summer; he told her that a group of young specialists had arrived recently, and that there had been a final decision in the Geological Administration to let her remain in his expedition.

"I am very glad about it, Valentina Sergeyevna," he added. "Everything is turning out as you wished."

"As I wished . . ." Valya echoed thoughtfully, and began slowly to lower the window, pressing heavily on the knob. A gust of wind rushed into the slanting aperture and tore the gauze scarf from her head and ruffled her brown hair. . . .

The car came out onto the broad sunny Krasny Avenue and rushed straight toward the broad sky-blue expanse of the Ob River.

That evening as Valya sat curled up on her little sofa looking through the latest magazines there was a brief knock at the door and Nina Sorokina, the girl who had shared Valya's hopes, joys and dreams in the recent war years, burst into the room.

She came in like a whirlwind, gave Valya an impetuous hug, saying breathlessly: "Oh, Valya darling, I am so glad you're home, because I have some wonderful news for you. Wait, I'll show him to you!"

And she rushed out of the room and came back a moment later leading by the hand a strapping, red-cheeked youth with a large smiling face and huge knot-

ted hands which in his confusion he did not know where to put.

"This is Semyon, Valya. Isn't he wonderful?" said Nina, and standing on tiptoe she laid her hand on her Semyon's shoulder. And he with an unconscious gesture bent his head and pressed his cheek for a second against her fingers, saying reproachfully:

"Now then, Nina, you mustn't go around showing me off like this. . . ."

"And why shouldn't I show you off, I'd like to know?" Nina asked genuinely surprised. "Why shouldn't everyone know how happy I am? Oh, and Valya, guess what my name is now? Belenkaya! Isn't that sweet? It's the sort of name I've always wanted to have!"

Nina had grown much prettier in the past year, she had that pure wholesome beauty that comes to young women at the age of twenty. Her thick chestnut hair made a rich frame for her little round face with its creamy white skin. But she was the same Nina, full of high spirits one moment, wistful and sad the next, passing from one mood to another without the slightest transition. Now she was clearly posing a little before her young husband who could not take his eyes off her.

They sat down side by side opposite Valya and over a cup of tea Semyon outlined their plans for the future.

To begin with he had decided not to stay in Novosibirsk.

"You mean we both decided!" Nina put in.

Semyon nodded and hastened to confirm that they had indeed settled this important question together. The next thing had been to decide where to go and what to do. But that had settled itself, at least so it seemed. Semyon, you see, was a skilled mechanic, and not long ago he

had met a man by the name of Khomyakov from the Kuzbas who had invented a wonderful mining machine, a combine. This man needed the help of men like Semyon. As for Semyon, the more he had learned about both the inventor and his machine the more enthusiastic he had become about the whole idea.

"Oh, Valya!" Nina interrupted breathlessly, assuming a look of mock dismay. "He's become exactly like that Rogov of yours, the way you used to describe him. He all but swept me off my feet with all this! I'm so happy!"

"Oh yes, about Rogov," Semyon took up eagerly "A remarkable coincidence you know, but we'll be going to the very mine where your Pavel Gordeyevich is working, because that Khomyakov works in the same mine. Won't that be fine for me and for Nina too? She won't feel quite so strange in the new place having someone like you beside her."

Half an hour later when Semyon rose to go Nina motioned to him, and taking Valya by the hand led her out into the kitchen. As she closed the door behind her she looked about critically and sighed

"I never noticed how low and sort of cramped it is in here," she said

"Really," Valya replied rather dryly. "Rogov used to say the same thing. 'Low and cramped.' But Vasili Pan-teleyevich doesn't think so. He always says it is so nice to come back to a cosy little place like this after travelling to distant parts."

"Oh Valya, what are you saying!" Nina came up close to her friend and searched her face anxiously. "How could you have let that happen? You mean, you went specially to Rogov. ." she broke off

"Yes, I went specially to tell him the truth," Valya replied, outwardly calm. "But I didn't tell him because I hadn't the courage to meet him face to face. Oh, I can't even bear the thought of it. . . . You can't be anything but frank with Pavel, even for a moment!"

"But, Valya, you love him!"

"Yes, I do. . ." Valya stopped and for a moment she closed her eyes. "But," she stammered, "lately . . . lately, I have been very happy working with Vasili Panteleyevich. . . . Really and truly happy. And what was I to do? I cannot lie about it either to Skitsky or to Rogov, can I? That's what I told Rogov in my note. . . ."

"You told that to Rogov?" Nina recoiled in something like horror. "How could you have said that to him? It isn't true, Valya! It can't be!"

"But it is. ." Valya sat down on a rickety chair and covered her face with her hands. "It is true, Nina quite true. Oh, I am so miserable"

Nina straightened up, her brow wrinkled in thought. Then she sat down beside her friend.

Semyon read the last few issues of *Pravda*, leafed through two magazines and paced up and down the little sitting room for the better part of an hour and, finally worried, he went out and knocked at the kitchen door. It opened at once and through the narrow crack he glimpsed Nina's harassed face. She shook her finger at him, said "Hush!" and closed the door again.

. . . For a long time after her visitors had gone Valya wandered aimlessly from one little room to another, pausing in front of the darkened windows, and sitting for a while in a corner of the sofa only to spring up again a few minutes later and continue her restless pacing. . . .

For some reason she thought of that funny little miner who had given her such a glad welcome at the door of Rogov's house; then she remembered her talk with Danilov and how he had pressed her hand on parting but had carefully avoided her eyes. She remembered her fruitless trip to the mine down to the smallest detail and she recalled what Nina, her cheeks flaming with anger, had said to her as she took her leave:

"Valya, it isn't like you to do a thing like that. That isn't the way to live."

Nina was right—that was not the way to live.

CHAPTER XLI

On his return from Kemerovo, Rogov decided to go to the pit straight from the railway station.

"Don't you want me to drop you off at your flat, Pavel Gordeyevich?" the driver asked him.

Rogov waved the question aside.

"Let your conscience tell you where to drive me."

"My conscience points to the pit," the driver laughed. "Here you are!"

"We were expecting you," the Party organizer and the chief engineer chorused as Rogov walked into his office.

He gave them both a searching look and, satisfied that all was well at the pit, he sighed with relief.

"Well?" Bondarchuk urged. "Out with it. We have to be in the section in half an hour. Khomyakov is waiting."

"Not so fast, not so fast," Rogov seized the Party organizer by the shoulders. "In the first place I've missed you and secondly I am waiting for news about the incline. How is it coming along?"

Filenkov unrolled the latest plan of the working.

"There you are! The water has been taken care of, we've got it under control."

"Good!" Rogov took off his coat, sat down at his desk and, resting his palms on his knees, he said:

"Well, where shall I begin? I was at the Regional Committee and from there I had a good look at the Kuzbas, at my native land. . . ."

"Get a good view from there?" Bondarchuk asked with something like envy in his voice.

"Magnificent! Takes your breath away "

"Good!" said the Party organizer in a tone of finality. "I envy you, but I'm not asking any more questions. You'll tell us all about it tomorrow at the conference. Agreed?"

They were about to leave when the switchboard operator phoned to say that there was a call for the mine chief on the direct wire. Rogov hurried to the telephone.

The Minister's voice, coming over the wire from a long distance, sounded faintly in Rogov's ear. Now and again electrical interference drowned it out completely, and sometimes it sounded so faint that it seemed to be carried away by the gusty spring breeze.

"Yes, yes, the conference will take place tomorrow," Rogov replied. "We thank you for the honour, Comrade Minister. You may rest assured that the banner is now in reliable hands. Yes, I have soberly appraised the situation. I judge the miners working with me exclusively by their merits. Thank you, Comrade Minister. Please come, you will be very welcome. Good-bye."

Rogov hung up the receiver and, swinging round to face Bondarchuk and Filenkov, he ran both hands through his hair.

"Did you hear that?" he shouted. "The Minister's coming!"

Ten minutes later, as they were emerging from the pit bottom into the drift, Rogov suddenly turned to his companions.

"They told me over at the Regional Committee that sixteen mines contended for the banner! Sixteen! And in a month from now there will be twenty-five, thirty! So you can see how hard we'll have to work if we don't want to surrender our positions."

When the mine chief and the Party organizer reached the working where Khomyakov's coal combine was to be tested, they found Sevastyanov and three miners waiting for them. Close on their heels the mine surveyor dashed in panting and more fidgety than ever. Seeing Rogov and Bondarchuk there, he made a gesture of despair: the pneumatic system had gone out of order, and he needed a new valve to repair it. To get one he had had to run up to the stockroom but the man in charge had not been around.

"What are we going to do now? After all these months of hard work!" Khomyakov pulled his spectacles off his nose.

"The base can be shifted by hand for the time being," boomed Filenkov. "Now we've only got to see whether everything is right in principle. The timing can be done afterwards."

While the shuttle was shifted to the far end of the thirty-metre base and the cutting edges were wedged against the breast of the seam, Rogov and Bondarchuk leaned back against a heap of coal to listen to the sounds of the men at work.

"Farther, farther up," somebody shouted. "Take your cue from the machine!"

This was the sort of thing that made you wish there were forty-eight hours in a day. Before their mind's eye generations of miners passed in review—coal hewers whose lives had been spent in backbreaking labour at the face. There was a time when the hewer spent nearly half of his working hours nicking and kirving in prone or kneeling position. Now hundreds of highly perfected machines had made their appearance to lighten the miners' labour. The coal bed was undercut by coal cutting machines, broken up by explosives and electrical or pneumatic drills, and carried from the face by transporters and conveyors of diverse kinds. Yet there was one gap left in this streamlined system of mechanical mining: the coal still was shovelled onto the transporter belts by men using ordinary shovels. Now the time had come to close this gap, to make machines do the work throughout. This was a problem on which engineering thought had been engaged for some time, seeking to produce a machine at once simple to operate, manoeuvrable and as sturdy as everything about a mine must be.

Rogov's experienced eye had noticed the weak spots in the Khomyakov combine already when it was being assembled, but for all that the fundamental idea of the ingenious design captured the imagination. To bring this idea to final fruition it was worth sacrificing sleep as the mine surveyor had done, worth working at high pressure, without thought of rest.

The men clustered around the motor in the conveyor gallery. A mechanic bent over the machine, tightening a bolt here, tapping a part there.

"Pavel Gordeyevich, we can start her!" Khomyakov called out. There he was, dirty, untidy, but happy, alive in every fibre—a little old man with a youthful spirit.

Without saying a word, Rogov slowly straightened the mine surveyor's necktie which had spilled out of his blue meoveralls. For a fraction of a second Khomyakov pressed his forehead against the engineer's shoulder and muttered something indistinct—it sounded like "I'm scared."

When the machine had been looked over once more, Rogov ordered everybody into the conveyor gallery. Only he and Khomyakov remained at the face. Filenkov took his place at the starting lever.

"Be carefull!" Khomyakov groaned to Filenkov, casting an apologetic glance at Rogov.

The latter raised his lamp. That was the signal.

"Gol!"

A turn of the lever and the motor in the gallery emitted a brief sigh followed by a low whine. Rogov held his breath. Another moment and the narrow transporter belt began moving noiselessly parallel to the face. Another turn of the lever and another, more powerful motor went into action. Now a dry crunching shattered the black silence—the shuttle was working! The triangular teeth of the saws cut into the seam, crushing, slicing the coal. A thin stream of slack appeared on the belt and began swelling like a rising flood.

Stumbling as they ran, men dashed in from the gallery. Somebody was waving his lamp wildly; someone else was shouting for all he was worth:

"It wo-o-rks!"

And the working was filled with the grinding of the cutter bar and mosquito whine of the motors.

Glancing behind him, Rogov saw the mine surveyor seated with his back against a prop, his eyes staring, his hand pressed to his heart. He was about to go over to the old man when something snapped like brittle glass in the shuttle. The motors emitted a rising whine and stopped.

Together with Filenkov and Bondarchuk, Rogov made a thorough examination and discovered that two eye bolts to which the cutter bar was attached had given way under the strain. The calculations were not at fault, the factory that had made the bolts had used the wrong kind of material.

Sitting down on the conveyor, Rogov turned his lamp on Filenkov.

"Sit down, Fyodor Lukich..." he said in a voice hoarse with excitement. "Call Khomyakov and the others, quick!"

"The machine, comrades, has been born!" he said when the others came up, accompanying his words with an emphatic gesture.

"I'm afraid it was a miscarriage," Khomyakov said with a catch in his voice.

"Nonsense!" Rogov interrupted the mine surveyor. "There's no need for you to be worried. The machine works, though not as well as it might. I'm not talking about the mishap. Now look here. . . ." He sprang up and trained the beam of his lamp at the coal face. "The shuttle did only three rounds. . . . If it had done another three we would have had to stop the machine in order to timber. At that rate we could run the combine at only ten to fifteen per cent of capacity. Timbering will hold the machine back like a ball and chain. To get rid of the ball and chain we've got to tackle the propping in a new way.

You know that the coal mining industry employs thousands of people just to keep the roof from coming down—that's enough miners to open up a whole coal field overnight. We've got to get rid of the old system of timbering!"

"What do you propose?" Filenkov breathed excitedly. "What's the way out?"

"The way out?" In the half-gloom of the working Rogov's face grew softer, pensive. "The way out is for Gerasim Petrovich's combine to work with its own portable sectional timbering—with hydraulic jacks!"

"That's right!" Bondarchuk exclaimed, taking Khomyakov's arm. "The very thing! Gerasim Petrovich, you'll be the hero of tomorrow's celebration. There isn't a miner who won't take his cap off to you."

Filenkov sprang up with amazing agility and, pulling Khomyakov along with him, started to go. "Let's go to the office and get to work on the preliminary computations!"

Rogov remained behind for a short while to see to the dismantling of the combine. He was thus engaged when Danilov found him.

"What happened to you?" Stepan grumbled. "I waited and waited and you didn't show up. I called the mine and they told me you'd come back but no one knew where you'd gone. So there I was with strict instructions since morning but unable to carry them out. 'As soon as he comes,' she said, 'the moment he shows up, give him this letter, Stepan.'"

"Who said that? Who?" Rogov interrupted him, startled.

"Who?" Stepan was surprised. "Why, Valya, of course. When she left for Tashtagol she told me: 'Give it to him the moment he shows up.' But that was hours ago."

Stepan sighed. "Generally speaking, I would say that you don't know how to manage things. I actually asked her to take you in hand, Pavel Gordeyevich."

Rogov first smiled, then laughed heartily, and finally could not restrain himself from embracing Danilov so hard that his bones cracked and his breath left him.

"Stepan," he said as he sat down on a piece of timber and hurriedly tore open the envelope. "You can't even imagine, Stepan, how wonderful she is. Hear me?"

He ran his eyes over the letter, then quickly pulled it away from under the beam of the lamp, glanced at Danilov, and began reading it all over again from the beginning. Two or three minutes passed; Stepan, growing impatient, turned his lamp on the engineer's face but swung it away at once: Rogov's eyes were tightly closed.

Stepan wanted to sit down beside him, he wanted to ask him softly: "Pavel Gordeyevich, tell me, what has happened?" But all he did was to touch Rogov's shoulder and say:

"Come along, Pavel Gordeyevich, you could do with a rest."

When Rogov replied, his voice was firm and unflinching:

"Not yet, Stepan. You go ahead. I'll look in at the incline. Afterwards I'll take the road home over the hill and commune with Spring on the way. Run along, Stepan."

CHAPTER XLII

Annushka turned her back on her husband so suddenly that her braids brushed his face. Nikolai glanced timidly over her shoulder, saw her eyelids blink rapidly and her soft upper lip tremble, and for a moment he moved

away to the window, and stood there, his shoulders twitching. He ran over to his wife, waltzed her around the room and fell on his knees.

"Annushka!"

Her head dropped lower and lower and when her lips reached his warm ear she whispered: "I'm so scared . . . I want him to be just like you!"

A baby! A new life was thrusting its way into theirs! What would it be? A son? But of course! And everyone would know that they had a son! And what a son!

"Annushka, the day he is born. . . ."

She covered his mouth with her hand.

"Silly boy, it'll be ages before he's born."

"When will it be, when?"

And he wouldn't give her any peace until she had told him all the details. . . .

They walked to the pit hand in hand, their eyes meeting as if by accident at nearly every step

"What is it?"

"Nothing, why?"

"Isn't the wind grand? Makes you feel as if you were flying!"

"Go ahead and fly, but see you come home early," she cautioned.

They parted at the steel viaduct. Annushka climbed the winding hill path leading to the incline shaft where the red flag on the top of the tall pyramid of the tippie flapped in the wind. She looked back at the pit—there too flags and streamers were flying; the fresh breeze carried the strains of music from the loud-speakers. Kapitalnaya was preparing for a grand celebration.

Reaching the crest of the hill she paused to gaze at the scene that spread before her. Mountains, yellow moun-

tains with green patches on them, mountains without end, and over the mountains, the blue sky. Far away at the very horizon hung pinkish white clouds, motionless and majestic. Kuznetsk land—what caressing winds sweep over you in springtime, what a wealth of glorious colours bloom on your expanses!

Spreading out her hands palms downward, as if letting them rest on the land that lay before her, Annushka closed her eyes. Now the wind seemed to lift her off her feet and carry her away, away. . . How good it was to be alive! How good! Let her son, her big, clever son, make haste and come into this wonderful world.

"Are you all right, Anna Maximovna?"

She jumped at the unexpected sound of a voice beside her, and burst out laughing. It was old Voshchin. He had come up quietly and was looking at her tenderly from beneath his bushy straw-coloured eyebrows.

"Did you think I was sick, Afanasi Petrovich?"

"Well, I see a lass standing all by herself with her eyes screwed up tight. What was I to think?"

"No, Afanasi Petrovich, I feel wonderful. I feel so wonderful I want to sing!"

"Sing?" the old man did not seem surprised. "You're all such songbirds nowadays. Where are you off to?"

Annushka pointed to the hill rising in the distance.

"The inclined shaft, Afanasi Petrovich."

"Hm . . ." Voshchin smiled. "I would advise you to let the incline go for a bit. The Prokopyevsk folks ought to be here any minute now. It wouldn't be bad to organize a proper welcome. Not a regular meeting—that will be tomorrow—but just to see that there are plenty of people around to meet them. Let folks see the banner coming back to the pit. Eh?"

"The banner?" Annushka was so surprised that her hand flew to her breast "Why didn't Bondarchuk tell me anything about it? Afanasi Petrovich I'm off!"

Sanka Lukin and Mitenka had dutifully accepted the task of runners imposed on them by Cherepanov as soon as he had heard Dr Tkachenko's verdict

"No, my lad," said the physician after he had examined the crew leader, "no running around for you You've got to stay quietly in bed for a few days Influenza is a nasty business, you know."

Cherepanov was disgusted To be forced to lie in bed when so much was happening outside was hard on a fellow. True, Sanka and Mitenka kept him well enough informed of developments at the pit and the colliery as well But that wasn't the same as being there yourself, and besides it was hard to sort out from their jumbled accounts what was important and what was not

Yesterday evening Sanka had come with an amazing bit of news:

"Khomyakov's combine is going to be tested!"

"The combine!" Cherepanov groaned "And I have to lie here and listen to your stories!" He was about to get out of bed when Lukin slipped out of the room and turned the key in the lock.

"Some life!" Cherepanov complained to the ceiling "Having to lie on your back with Spring bursting in through the open window and calling you out into the open, to fill your lungs with fresh air, to get your hands on something and work!"

The clock on the wall ticked away the seconds, the mother-of-pearl accordion on the table near the bed where

Danilov had left it glittered in the sun. Cherepanov remembered the night at Pit No. 10 with Andrei Gushcha and Shura, and involuntarily he glanced down at his palm—the one the girl's warm hand had touched.

He moved the chair with the wireless set nearer to the bed and spent a long time twiddling the knobs. Snatches of music mingled with crackling and sputtering and a measured beat like the tapping of a drum. Ah, there was Moscow. Now what was Moscow saying? They were giving a news bulletin. A brief account of everyday life; the miners figured in it too, and the Kuzbas too; the announcer reported that the five-month plan had been completed ahead of time. Cherepanov had a hand in that, so had Danilov and Mitenka. . . .

And here was Mitenka himself. He had brought Cherepanov's dinner and immediately proceeded to bustle about awkwardly turning everything topsy-turvy with every move he made. First he spilt the *borshch*, then he tore the curtain cord in an attempt to draw the curtains, and when he climbed up to mend it he stepped on a saucer and broke it. Pausing for a minute to catch his breath, he said:

"I was walking past block No. 5 when I almost bumped into Galina Afanasyevna. She was walking with her head bent and her face was as white as anything. I said: 'How do you do, Galina Afanasyevna,' and she looked at me as if she'd never seen me before. 'What is your name, little boy?' she asked me. Little boy! How do you like that?" Mitenka stuck out his chest a little and laughed to cover his indignation. "Little boy!"

But the next minute it really did strike him as funny and bursting into peals of laughter, he dropped onto the bed repeating: "Little boy, she said."

"There's nothing funny about it," Cherepanov pulled him up. "But what about Galina Afanasyevna? Why was she so pale? Did you think about that?"

"Yes, she was awful pale really."

"Yes, but what was the reason? Perhaps something happened at the incline? You be sure and find out about that."

Just then there was a knock at the door and Annushka burst in. Mitenka retreated hastily to the window just to be on the safe side.

"They're bringing the banner!" she said breathlessly and the next minute she was gone

Mitenka glanced at the crew leader. And all he did when the latter leapt out of bed, was to remark casually: "What about doctor's orders?"

"Doctor's orders be damned. Help me get dressed," shouted Cherepanov.

"Influenza!" he snorted. "Purposely invented to annoy miners!"

There had been no official announcement that the Prokopyevsk delegation was due to arrive at four o'clock, yet the news had been known all over the sections, shops and hostels since morning. By three o'clock a crowd began to gather outside the mine office. The older folks seated themselves on benches and on the rim of the fountain while the young people thronged the paths of the small garden. The Voshchins, father and son, walked slowly around the fountain. Afanasi Petrovich was listening intently to something Grigori was telling him. In the middle of a knot of young miners, Mitenka was holding forth with an air of having delivered orations all his life.

Danilov came up with a worried look on his face.

Annushka touched his sleeve. "Is anything wrong, Stepan Georgievich?"

"Yes..." Stepan turned away irritably. "Have you seen Rogov?"

"No, I haven't. Why? Is anything the matter?" Annushka's voice sounded anxious.

"I hunted him up at twelve o'clock and gave him a letter.... And then he disappeared. He's had bad news...."

"Bad news?..." A sorrowful, maternal look crept into Annushka's eyes. "So he knows...."

"Yes. She's written to say she's leaving him. That's what I think it is. And I think she's right. But, of course, it's a nasty blow for him. I know Pavel Gordeyevich, he can't stand half measures, in work or in ...er ... anything else. If only I could help him somehow...."

Stepan, and Annushka after him, glanced over their shoulders at the crowd of miners, and the white building of Kapitalnaya.

They heard the loud hum of voices, the rapid heavy throb of the compressor pumps, the clang of the hoist bells. And over all this, over the excited murmur of voices, over the labouring breath of the pit a red flag floated atop the mine tippie etched against the sky.

"It's hard for Pavel Gordeyevich," Stepan said, "but he'll get over it. I know him."

At that moment they heard Voshchin the elder calling:

"Gerasim Petrovich, come and join us!"

The miners turned and saw Khom'akov standing in the office doorway. The mine surveyor peered nearsightedly at the gathering, waved his hand in greeting and came over to Voshchin with little mincing steps.

"So our Kuzbas mining combine is a success?" Voshchin asked, regarding Khomyakov with admiration. "Well, thanks, engineer, thanks."

Khomyakov shifted his weight from one foot to another in confusion.

"There's lots of room for improvement yet, comrades, that's the trouble"

"As long as there's something to improve on you've no call to be discouraged," Nekrasov retorted. "Don't worry. Once the machine is made we'll get it to work all right."

Others joined in the conversation. They recalled what conditions in the mines were like before the Revolution when the miner could not even hope for a simple conveyor, let alone a combine.

"The 'free' miner in the old days was no better off than a convict condemned to hard labour," remarked Voshchin.

The sun sank lower and lower into the west, it seemed to lose some of its brilliance, and still the delegation from Prokopyevsk had not arrived. Part of the waiting crowd went off to the second shift, a few set out for home, and it looked as if the welcome would not take place.

Just then Mitenka came dashing out from behind a corner of the office building waving his arms and shouting "They're coming!"

For a moment the crowd was still, then it stirred and moved forward to meet the guests, growing as it went.

The first to alight from the car was old man Khodykin, the one who had carried the banner away from Kapitalnaya the previous autumn. With him were two other men. Khodykin bobbed his head in greeting and, spreading out his hands, he said with a short laugh:

"You see, comrades, the job they've given me in my old age. I took the banner away, now I'm bringing it back. In a little while I'll come again to. . . ."

"Oh no you won't!" someone interrupted quickly. "You won't have to make any more trips of this kind after today."

It was Voshchin. He introduced himself to Khodykin and the two men looked each other over and exchanged a few words about the weather. Khodykin launched into an account of affairs over at Prokopyevsk, but Afanasi Petrovich stopped him with an impatient nod:

"That can wait, comrade," he said. "Where is it?"

Khodykin surveyed the faces of the victors crowded around the car with understanding.

"Right you are," he said with good-humoured envy. "Might as well have it since you've won it."

He went over to the car, carefully drew out the red staff and the banner encased in a white linen cover and raised it so that everyone could see it.

"There it is. Where am I to put it?"

"Wait a bit, Comrade Khodykin," Voshchin stopped him. "You tell us this first: the men over at the Prokopyevsk mine haven't given up, have they? Haven't lost heart?"

The little pointed grey beard of the delegate tilted defiantly.

"Why? Because they've given up the banner?"

"Yes. . . ."

"See here now, our miners are cut from the same cloth as the Kapitalnaya men, aren't they?"

"That's so," Voshchin agreed. "But just the same it would be hard to find as much strength anywhere as we've got gathered here. Now let's have that banner, we'll find a fitting place for it."

Glancing over his shoulder, he beckoned to Danilov, and amid an awed silence, he said in a low distinct voice: "Take it, Stepan Georgievich, you are one of the youngest and worthiest. Take it!"

Stepan, his eyes glowing with gratitude, slowly removed the linen cover, unfurled the red silken banner, and motioning to the miners to follow him, strode off toward the club.

CHAPTER XLIII

When he left Danilov in the drift, Rogov went up to the surface through the emergency exit. As he approached the mouth of the incline shaft he was surprised to find Semyon Starodubtsev there. With an effort he reminded himself that Semyon was after all one of the trust officials now in charge of capital construction, which meant that he had not come all this way for nothing. Galya was arguing hotly with him over something.

"It's an outrage, Comrade Starodubtsev! An outrage!" Rogov heard her repeat insistently.

"Here's the chief himself," said Semyon, turning to Rogov. "Greetings, Pavel. Excuse me for not giving you due notice of my coming. I heard there was trouble down here in the incline so I decided to drop in and have a look."

"You're improving, man," Rogov observed.

"Why do you think so?"

"You heard that all was not well over here and you came rushing to the spot. You weren't in the habit of doing that before."

Semyon smiled placatingly and turned to Galya.

"He's as sarcastic as ever. I've known him for ten years and he's always been the same."

"I don't change," Rogov admitted. "That's one of my faults."

"Well, we all have our faults," Starodubtsev said. "Some more, some less...."

Rogov heard what Galya had to say about the situation at the heading. There were only a few finishing touches to be done now.

"Well, I must thank you!" he said as he examined the upper section of the shaft once again and noted with a smile how Galya flushed at his praise. "I thank you, Galina Afanasyevna, in the name of the whole pit. This is a load off my mind.... Now we can start the coal moving...."

"So I'm unemployed again, Pavel Gordeyevich," Galya said. "What shall I do now? Report to the personnel department?"

"Oh no, you mustn't do that!" Rogov objected. "What about the two inclines down below? Or the new hoist shaft? Who's going to do them? Tell me that, Galina Afanasyevna!" He brought his face down close to hers and, paying no heed to Starodubtsev, went on in a low voice: "You see, Galya, I didn't need to worry about the shaft because you were in charge. You are a first-rate engineer.... Let's make a compact to work together for a long time to come. Shall we?"

"A long time?" Galya echoed with a shade of something like alarm in her eyes, but her voice was quite calm as she replied: "It's all the same to me what pit I work in, but... of course, I'd rather work with you. It's more secure."

"Excellent!" Rogov said, and looking now at Galya, now at Starodubtsev, went on speaking rapidly. "So as not to have trouble with water next time we'll use the new

drill. Right? We'll cut out the pit bottom, install the machine there and work upwards along the seam. That'll take care of the water."

"That will require working with jeweller's precision," Starodubtsev observed diffidently. "Making a hole ninety centimetres in diameter in a seam a metre twenty or thirty in thickness leaves you a safe margin of error of about one-tenth of a degree. Rather like twirling your fingers with your eyes closed and then trying to bring them together. It's the same sort of game. . . ."

Rogov snorted.

"Fiddlesticks! We haven't any time for twirling our fingers or twiddling our thumbs. Galina Afanasyevna, I want you to ignore all of Starodubtsev's dire prognostications," he smiled. "But we'll readily accept his assistance."

Starodubtsev pretended it was all a joke.

"You certainly don't change, Pavel," he sighed. "That is how people always remember you, even people who haven't met you more than once or twice. I was talking to a prominent scientist recently in Novosibirsk and I had barely mentioned your name when he interrupted me. 'Excuse me, but did you say Rogov? I know Engineer Rogov, yes indeed!'"

"Who was that?" Rogov asked.

"Skitsky, Vasili Panteleyevich Skitsky."

"Skitsky?" Rogov nodded. "Ah yes. Good man. Brilliant."

"Yes, he's a brainy chap," Semyon assented eagerly. "Sorry I hadn't a chance to see more of him. There wasn't time for more than a few brief remarks on my report. You know how busy he is. And then of course there's Spring in the air, and on that score he could teach some of us

here a thing or two...." Semyon nodded playfully toward Galya, then turned to Rogov and looking him straight in the eye he wound up casually: "The professor is going to marry his assistant. Yevtyukhova."

"Indeed..." Rogov observed in a flat voice. He glanced quickly at his wrist watch and then at Galya.

Galya involuntarily winced as if someone had been about to strike her. Never had she seen such a vacant, stricken look in Rogov's eyes. It was as if all the live colour had been drained out of them in a single instant.

"Very good, Galina Afanasyevna, so it's agreed. And now I must go."

Semyon made as if to follow him but Rogov stopped him with a glance, and strode off through the bushes without turning back.

"Well, that's how it is, Galina Afanasyevna..." Starodubtsev began in confusion.

"Stop!" Galya cut him short. "That will do! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. How could you have said that to Rogov..."

She ran quickly past the rock dump, down to the stream, waded across and, pulling herself up by the bushes, climbed up the steep slope on the other side. She had just reached the path when she caught sight of Rogov some distance ahead. He was walking with his usual swinging stride, only his hands were more restless than usual, as he kept buttoning and unbuttoning his jacket. Presently he paused by a pine tree and cap in hand looked up at its crown and then went on again. He showed no surprise when he saw Galya on the path, he seemed to have expected to find her there.

"Pavel Gordeyevich . . ." Galya stepped aside to let him pass. "Excuse me . . . I wanted to ask you. . ."

"Perhaps you had better not," Rogov said squeezing her elbow gently. "Don't ask any questions, Galya Starodubtsev happened to touch a very raw spot, that's all. Thank you."

He climbed the hill with the same easy swinging stride. At this hour you could commune from the top of the hill with Spring and with the whole world, provided, of course, you understood the multivoiced, polyglot language of the April day.

The path wound steeply up the hillside to the rust-hued plateau at the top. The western slope of the hill was almost bare of vegetation. The woods began farther away beyond the watershed. Here and there reddish clumps of very young birch appeared, and over to the right of the road, perched on the top of a steep cliff, a solitary pine stood, waving its green branches dreamily and gazing into the distance as if it were at once sad to see another spring go by and happy to feel the thick cool sap quicken again under its golden bark.

At a turning in the path Rogov stopped, screwed up his eyes, dazzled by the bright radiance of the day, and looked about him. Holding his breath, he walked almost on tiptoe over to a young birch sapling and stopped. Somewhere here—careful, now, or you'll step on it—he had seen a tiny bird drop. But where was it, could it have walked away? Rogov bent down, seized by the long-forgotten excitement to boyhood bird-nesting expeditions.

"Aha!" he said in surprise as a swift-winged bird darted up from under his feet with a gentle cry. "Peewit! Peewit!"

Still chuckling, he squatted on his haunches and cautiously moved aside the tufts of last year's grass. In a tiny hollow lay the nest—round and neat—with the edges turned inward and filled with tufts of grass and bluish-grey fluff. He put his hand inside the nest and it seemed to feel the warmth of it suffuse his being. And over his head the cry of the bird sounded ever more anxious and plaintive: "Peewit! Peewit!"

. "That's all right, old girl," Rogov said soothingly as he rose to his feet. "You needn't worry. I understand!"

Further on he sat down on a tree stump and ran his hand over its rough skin on the side exposed to the sun. Yes, it was really warm here.

Warm. . . . Rogov rubbed his forehead vigorously as if trying to remember something painful and long since forgotten.

"Ah, Valya, Valya. . . ."

He felt in his pocket and brought out the crumpled letter, smoothed it out on his knee and read it again, from beginning to end.

"If only I were able to protect you from even a moment's unhappiness. . . . Pavel!" Valya wrote. "I could, of course, but I hate so to lie. And you yourself couldn't endure it. . . . No, that isn't what I wanted to say.

"For some time past I have found myself feeling closer in mind and heart to Vasili Panteleyevich Skitsky. I have fought this feeling with all my strength, but somehow imperceptibly he has come into my life. I came to tell you that, but I did not find you. I want you to forget it all. I trust you will. I believe in you. Forgive me, Pavel.

"Valya."

He read the letter over and over again and then let it drop between his knees. "But why, oh why, is it so hard?" he asked himself.

Then he rose and continued to climb the hill. The road was steep but his heart was calmer now, his thoughts no longer raced madly, his head was clear.

At last he reached the upper plateau. He straightened up, slowly unbuttoned his jacket and took off his cap. Ah, how far one could see from here! He feasted his eyes on his native earth spread out before him.

Below lay the deep valley, the Chernaya Taizhina, but if you raised your eyes a trifle you saw the endless ridge of mountains, some yellow and bare, others thickly wooded. Far away to the east the eye faintly discerned the eternal snows of the Altai peaks, shimmering in a pinkish haze, over to the north a cloud of smoke denoted the town of Stalinsk.

And if you were to climb still higher . . . Rogov closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them to peer again into the limitless spaces of the spring world. Kuzbas! It spread itself over more than a thousand kilometres from north to south, nearly all the way from Teletskoye Lake in the Altai, across the valleys of innumerable mountain rivers, to the Mariinsk taiga where the great Siberian trunk line intersected it. The Kuzbas!

The Kuzbas which had grown up like a worker, matured and hardened like a soldier, spruce and stern in its simple working garb. . . . The Kuzbas which meant mines factories, power stations, collective-farm fields.

The Kuzbas! One could spend a whole lifetime in tireless, unremitting labour and accomplish a mere fraction of all the great and essential work to be done on its expanses. And what colossal quantities of heat

and power were yet to be released from its bounteous depths!

Rogov regarded the snow-capped peaks that fringed the southern Kuzbas on the east, and threw out his hand as if to touch the angular shoulder of one of the mountain spurs.

"Wait," he said softly, "wait a bit and it will be your turn to yield up your secrets to us. We would start at once, but we're a bit shorthanded at the moment."

A fresh breeze from the direction of Chernaya Taizhina brought with it the ringing of hammers. He glanced down and felt as if borne on wings from the mountain top. Chernaya Taizhina valley with its snow and its yellow patches where the snow had thawed, the dark green pyramids of its firs and the willow bushes in bloom, was filled to the very brim with silvery light.

Rogov was reluctant to tear his eyes away from the scene. But it was time to be going. He had to go over to the new exploration shafts. He glanced over to the northern slope of the hill by which he had ascended and saw someone coming up the path. Straining his eyes he saw that it was Bondarchuk. The Party organizer was striding along, swinging his hands and it was clear that he was in a hurry.

"Hey there!" he called from below. "What happened to you? I've been hunting for you for a whole hour and here you are taking a stroll and admiring the Kuzbas!"

"You're right, that's exactly what I was doing," Rogov admitted. "I was sorry you weren't with me."

Bondarchuk sat down on a dry knoll nearby, wiped his perspiring face and panted wearily.

"Whew, I'm tired. . . ."

"Anything happened?"

"Nothing much . . . They brought the banner back from Prokopyevsk, and I went to look for you, that's all. What could happen?"

An awkward silence fell between the two men. They sat there face to face, each waiting for the other to speak. Rogov smoothed down a tuft of dry grass with the toe of his boot and reached mechanically for his cigarettes.

Bondarchuk wiped the sweat from his brow and looked up at his comrade from under his hand.

"Is it something very unpleasant?" he inquired

"Very." Rogov handed him the envelope with the letter. "Read it. I'm not complaining, mind. I merely want you to understand."

Several minutes passed while Bondarchuk read and re-read the letter. Now and again tiny wrinkles formed under his eyes. Then he folded the letter neatly and put it back in the envelope.

"I see," he said, bringing his hand down heavily on the envelope. "It's hard. And in matters like these, words mean so little . . . But life, Pavel, life doesn't stop for a second. This great life of ours!"

"Yes, that's what I have been thinking."

"Thinking! But don't you feel it?"

"I'm trying." Rogov smiled and shook himself. "You know what, Victor, let's go over to the distant shafts together. I'm a bit worried about installation work at the substation."

"Aren't you going to the mine?"

"Later on. I always like to leave the best things for last."

En route he inquired cautiously: "Why were you looking for me? Did you guess something was amiss?"

"I did," Bondarchuk confirmed. "Galina Voshchina came to see me. She told me about her meeting with Valya and the talk with Starodubtsev."

"I see..." Rogov involuntary quickened his pace.

Dusk had fallen when they returned from their tour of inspection. At one of the sharp turnings in the path they stopped. Bondarchuk laid a hand on Rogov's shoulder.

Below them the garlands and constellations of lights traced the outlines of the mining town. On the opposite slope the houses were invisible in the gloaming and the bright squares of windows seemed to be looking straight out of the hillside.

The land slumbered. Above the horizon an unfading strip of blue fringed the night sky, and over in the north beyond the mountains the sky was aglow with the reflected light of towns and mines. From a dark fir copse nearby came the cry of an unseen bird and somehow it seemed that the very earth was breathing, the earth of Kuznetsk land - ancient, mighty and young.

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics